

Catching Rabbits

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Catching Rabbits

by [aelibia](#)

Summary

Sakura thought she'd been ready for anything: death, sacrifice, time travel...she sure as hell wasn't ready for Itachi Uchiha.

Catching rabbits

Chapter Summary

In this chapter Sakura is naked for like, a while

Chapter Notes



is this anything

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Death was cold.

It hit Sakura like a knife in her back—or, more accurately, a long, bony finger through her chest.

They'd been thrown in and out of dimensions for what felt like hours—her, Naruto, Sasuke, Kakashi-sensei, Obito—and finally—*finally*—it

felt like they had the upper hand. Naruto and Sasuke, armed with their twin seals, advanced on Kaguya, their bodies working beautifully in tandem. It was perfect. Should've been perfect.

But Sakura saw the flash in Kaguya's eyes and knew that they wouldn't be fast enough. And so, Sakura moved. She bore down on Kaguya like the lance before a horse; with the final bit of chakra she could muster, Sakura went for Kaguya fist-first, hell-bent on protecting the boys' vital attack. It was what she'd always done: protect, defend. It was what she'd always been *good* at. Wild sparks of chakra flew in Sakura's face, nearly blinding her as Kaguya drew nearer; every inch felt like an eon. Sakura endured. Almost there.

Then came the strike: the bone-ash technique went straight through her ribs like a hot knife through butter. There was no defense. The last thing Sakura saw was Kaguya's face. Seventeen years of living, fighting, loving, ended in a fraction of a second.

One twitch in another direction and Kaguya might never have made contact. One shout from Kakashi might have distracted Kaguya long enough to provide an opening. Or perhaps, Sakura thought as she watched her body crumble, none of this would have happened in the first place if she'd just done one more day, one more hour, one more *minute* of training. A million other things *might* have happened. But they *didn't* happen. This did.

The technique radiated outward from the wound on her chest, turning Sakura's body into dust inch by inch. Tucked away in a pocket dimension, apart from everything in the world she ever knew, Sakura died. She died with Naruto and Sasuke's shouts of rage in her ear, with the memories of her friends giving her courage to leap into the void. She died with honor, knowing her sacrifice had bought Naruto and Sasuke enough time to end the rabby bitch for good. It didn't hurt at all.

Goodbye, Sakura thought. Oblivion swallowed her up with a sigh.

Did I change anything?

Did I love you enough?

Sakura opened her eyes to absolute darkness. That was the first surprising thing. Death, she'd heard from the resurrected shinobi, resolved itself quickly: you lived, you died, you woke up in the Pure Land surrounded by similarly deceased friends and family. No one had said anything about the darkness. Perhaps she hadn't been listening to the right people. Or perhaps the darkness was so temporary that no one thought it worth mentioning. She looked down and saw that she was naked, which did not concern her. Military life did not accommodate modesty, and besides that, Sakura felt quite alone.

She waited a while, and when nothing happened, she began to walk forward, following a path just barely visible in the inky blackness. The path rippled like water, though there was no wetness to it; each step Sakura took lit up the darkness like a flashlight, as the ripples made by her footsteps exposed flashing images beneath the surface. At first she paid them no mind, singularly determined to forge ahead, but soon curiosity got the better of her and she looked. And looked again. And looked some more.

“The battle?”

It was the battle; the one she'd just left behind. Distortion from the ripples blurred the scene, but Sakura could make out Naruto, Sasuke, Kakashi-sensei, Obito, and Kaguya still fighting one another. Without her. If what she saw was real, Sakura thought, that was a good thing, wasn't it? If they were still fighting, that meant they still had a chance to win.

Or, a traitorous voice whispered at the back of her head, it could mean you only delayed their deaths. Perhaps they'll join you soon.

"No," Sakura snapped. She rubbed at her face—clean, smooth, healthy—and kept walking. But that was the thing about this place: walking did not make the images go away. Neither did stomping a foot in frustration. The more Sakura walked, and the more she stomped, the more images appeared.

Not all of them were the same. In some, Naruto and Sasuke were dying, bleeding out in Kakashi-sensei's arms. In some, Kaguya returned to her army of White Zetsu in triumphant splendor, laying waste to the remnants of humanity.

"This isn't real," Sakura muttered. Kicking at the water only made things worse. Then the images exploded into fractals; each one showed the battle raging on from a different perspective. And what awful perspectives they were—her friends and comrades fell before the hoard, while she watched from above, helpless to stop it. Lee died. Kiba. Ino. Gai-sensei. Shikamaru. Mei. B. One right after the other.

"This can't be happening."

"It doesn't have to happen," said a voice from behind her. "If you're willing to change it."

Sakura spun around, and promptly fell right on her ass. Standing in front of her, hands tucked into his sleeves, was the Sage of Six Paths. Hagoromo, she knew now.

"How...?" Sakura trailed off. She wasn't even certain what she'd been

asking. How are *you* here? Why am *I* here? What *is* here, while we're at it? Why am I seeing these things?

How can I keep it from happening?

The Sage gestured for Sakura to come closer. She went to him, surprised that she felt no fear after her initial startle. For whatever reason, she knew with absolute certainty that he would not harm her. A genjutsu, perhaps, but a quick *Kai!* made no difference. Thankfully, the Sage took no offense—if anything, he appeared pleased, a small smile pulling at the edge of his mouth.

“Look,” he said. He bent over and put his hand in the water. Immediately, the battle scenes took on clarity. The ripples vanished. And when all revealed itself, Sakura wished it hadn't.

Hinata died. Kurenai died. A died. Gaara died. TenTen. Akamaru. Choji. Shizune. Sakura couldn't look away.

“Is this real?”

“It is.”

“Why?”

“You died,” the Sage said simply.

“But—” Sakura sputtered. Wringing her hands, she searched the images desperately for any sliver of hope. Why was Kaguya not dead?

Where had Sasuke and Naruto gone? “But I hit her. I bought them *time*, and I thought—”

Shikaku. Inoichi. Raido. Genma. And countless others Sakura had no names for.

“I thought I was protecting them. If I couldn’t even do that...”

The darkness, then, felt more fitting—a punishment, perhaps. Wandering this empty land forever, she would relive her failures over and over again, until all her debts had been paid. To her parents, for letting them down, to Tsunade, for wasting her time, to Sasuke and Naruto, for not being good enough.

“You’re wrong,” the Sage said. Sakura looked up to see an otherworldly face lined with concern and compassion in equal measure. “There are no debts here but for mine. I chose to bless Sasuke and Naruto with my bloodline, and did not see until now that there were others left wanting.”

Feeling a little like a preschooler at roll call, Sakura pointed to herself. The Sage nodded.

“But just because I was on the same team...”

“It wasn’t that. Forgive me the interruption. We have little time, even in this place.” The Sage dipped his hand into the surface again, and the images changed. Happier times appeared all around them—little slivers of a life gone by: sharing her lunch with Naruto, starting her training with Tsunade, staring Gaara down in defense of Sasuke. “I put so much of myself into Naruto and Sasuke’s future because I believed that, like my sons, their power alone would be enough to change the world for the better. Instead, I watched them tear one another to

pieces, just like my descendants before them.”

An image floated by, of Naruto and Sasuke facing off at the Valley of the End. Others followed, each featuring two people Sakura did not recognize.

“Power is not enough,” the Sage said. “And because I did not realize that sooner, nothing changed. But I have a unique opportunity before me. My resurrection has allowed me, for better or for worse, to meddle. Just a bit. There’s a certain, half-finished technique I pilfered from my mother many years ago, and during my time in the Pure Land I finally perfected it.”

“I thought she could master any technique. Can’t she?”

“That is a simplification.” The Sage withdrew a hand from his sleeve. Gripped tight in his fingers was a scroll—a single scroll, so small as to be dainty. Though hardly any light split the darkness, the scroll glittered as the Sage manipulated it. “The more accurate explanation is that she preferred a more direct route to domination, and saw no use in developing more...subtle techniques.”

“What does it do?” Sakura watched as the scroll floated above the Sage’s palm, unfurling in an almost lazy manner and undulating in the air around them.

“I saw great potential in you,” the Sage continued. “I believe you could’ve been more, so much more, with the attention, guidance, and assistance I so selfishly allotted to my sons. Naruto and Sasuke, and the others who bore that chakra, cannot be relied on alone. We would not be speaking, I believe, had I realized this sooner.”

“Couldn’t anyone become great under the right circumstances? It

doesn't *have* to be me. Does it? I'm just the one who ended up on their team."

"Of course anyone can become great," the Sage said. "But if that is the case, then why not you?"

All right, that was fair.

"Being exceptional is not a prerequisite for happiness, Sakura. Regardless, I do believe in your potential. I am not a true Seer, but of the many futures I have peered into, indistinct as they are, your face always appears in the happiest ones. Alive. Whole. Magnificent. More than that, I could not discern. But you were a part of those happy futures. Always, you. The forgotten one. The one left behind."

Sakura bowed her head. "I'm nobody special. I don't come from powerful families like Naruto or Sasuke."

"Yes," the Sage said. "You get it now." He snapped his fingers, and the scroll began to glow. "I'm going to send you back a few years. Not too many. Too many years earlier or later, and the futures I saw fell apart."

Whipping her head back up, Sakura stared the Sage right in the face in open shock, rudeness be damned.

"Like, sending me back in *time*? That's what you're saying you want to do?"

"I am."

“Kaguya thought *time travel* was subtle?”

At that, the Sage grinned—he actually *grinned* at her.

“My mother is a complicated woman,” he said. “And I’m afraid this technique’s power, while impressive in description, is rather limited for the user. I used it once already, before I found you here. There was a certain event in *your* family’s history that altered the course of humanity. The scroll sent me back, and I was given three seconds to act.”

“You mean I’ve got *three seconds* to change history and hope that what I did was enough to stave off the entire Fourth War.”

“No,” the Sage said. “As I said, this technique is limited for the *user*. This, I believe, was what my mother disliked about it. I myself could travel backward and forward, but only for that tiny sliver of time. Whereas if I, the user, use the technique on *you*, I can send you anywhere, anytime, and there you will remain for as long as you live.”

Then that meant— “So it’s a one-way ticket. If I want to change things...”

“Then you have years to do so, but no inkling if what you’ve done is enough. You cannot return to assess what your work has done. You have only your present knowledge to guide you. But you will not be alone.”

“Wha—”

Suddenly the void pulsed, and shuddered, as though something lurked just beyond the pitch-black borders, seeking an entrance. Sakura inched closer to the Sage, crossing her arms and wishing for something with which to cover herself. The shudders ceased after a few moments, but the security that Sakura had felt before did not return.

Grasping her by the shoulders, the Sage peered into her eyes. The glow from the floating, shimmering scroll reflected off of his too-smooth skin and inhuman features. Sakura shrank back, worried after all he'd said that, somehow, he would find her lacking. But he did not waver.

"Defeating Kaguya will be no easy feat," the Sage said. "But I have faith in you. Both of you. Help one another. You will need his eyes for the journey ahead, and he will need your fortitude."

"Who—"

"You are already familiar with the Uchiha, I believe. He was an unexpected variable, but not an unwelcome one, and he will be a familiar face to you in what is sure to be an immense trial. But you will need every advantage you can get for the task ahead of you. I offer two gifts: a gift of power, and a gift of love."

Sakura blinked. She didn't even know where to begin responding to that. To *any* of it.

"Why are you sending me and Sasuke, but not Naruto? Of course I'll do everything I can to support Sasuke, but..."

The void shuddered a second time. Wails from a thousand White Zetsu permeated what had been calm silence.

The Sage sliced a hand through the air, a twitch in his jaw betraying the extent of the stress he was under. How hard did he have to work to maintain this separate space? How easy was it for Kaguya to break her way inside?

“She knows we are here. We must act quickly.”

Flickering through a set of seals too quick for Sakura to see, he reached out and pressed his thumbs to her temples. The scroll glowed even brighter, the light now beginning to sting Sakura’s eyes when she looked straight at it. Her head spun in a whirlwind of confusion. Motes of light materialized around her body, and when she looked down she saw that her feet were starting to disappear. Then the Sage began to disappear—and the void, the battle, the piercing howls...all of it.

“Remember, Sakura. Even the smallest of changes are far-reaching. You may find the world you return to is an unfamiliar place.”

“Could you just—”

“Help one another. Let love guide you.”

Right. Because that worked out so well for her the first time around.

“What the fu—”

The Sage slammed a hand against the surface of the void, and it shattered into billions of shimmering shards. And Sakura fell, fell, fell,

into the light.

Sakura came to in a dark room lit by soft, glowing candles. She was sitting back on her heels, but pain prevented further investigation: a headache split her skull right down the middle, and there was a burning in her chest like the worst heartburn she'd ever had. Soft voices exchanged conversation. But some sort of distortion blurred the discussion to the point where Sakura couldn't make out individual words, much less parse whole sentences. She also couldn't discern the speakers' identities, but two of those voices sounded so familiar....

Heavy incense, pungent with the smell of spices, floated across the room on wisps of smoke that settled onto her skin. Sakura focused on the smell, willing it to the front of her mind just so she could concentrate on *something* while the rest of the world got its shit together. Her first semi-coherent thought was one of elation—the *Sage's technique had worked!* But a persistent anxiety formed immediately after. He'd warned her there would be changes, and considering he'd dropped her ass-first into what appeared to be a serious meeting, she needed to find out what those were, and fast.

Gradually, the pain subsided. A clearer picture formed, that of a formal sitting room decorated with shining trinkets, tapestries, and vases stuffed full of scrolls. Beneath her shins lay a plush floor cushion made of woven carpet. Intricate, embroidered bees danced across the surface of the fabric. She wore a formal kimono in a rich, marigold color outlined with black and silver detailing. From there, Sakura worked her way out. Her body didn't feel quite right, especially around the hips—she was definitely younger, probably somewhere in the middle of puberty. She could sense someone sitting next to her—what looked to be a child her age with dark hair. Sasuke? Sakura rubbed at her eyes.

“What is your answer, my love?”

That voice—

Sakura whipped her head to face front, and the rest of the scene slammed into place. The room was still unfamiliar, but she knew the five adults before her, kneeling on woven cushions of their own: her parents, Sasuke's parents, and...no, it couldn't be....

“Grandmother?”

Sakura felt faint. Her grandmother had died when she was only six. A wealthy merchant from the Land of Honey, Satsuko Haruno had been killed by bandits conducting a raid on her caravan. Nothing had been left to send to the family, not even scraps of cloth to remember her by. There was only her voice, and what little Sakura recollected from her visits. Sakura's breathing quickened, and her vision began to dim around the edges. This was *not* the time to have a panic attack, but it wasn't likely her body planned to cooperate.

From her left came a hand: it settled on her back, the steady weight of it pressing against her homongi to hold her upright. Satsuko's face pulled tight with concern, and she lowered the ornamental fan to her lap.

“My love, are you well?”

“Yes,” Sakura gasped. “I'm well. I'm sorry; I got a bit overwhelmed, that's all. Could you please—ask me again?”

She *had* to be well. There was no other option.

“Do you agree to the terms of this betrothal? Both families have given

permission and support, but a word from you will end it, if that is your preference. There will be other families, and other people to marry. The decision is yours. Do not forget.”

Sakura pressed her lips together, and bit the inside of her cheek so hard it hurt. This, she thought, must have been the gift of love the Sage mentioned. Whatever he'd done had spared the Uchiha clan, and tied her and Sasuke together in order to make them stronger. Being close would enable more effective cooperation, and with the Uchiha Clan's resources they'd surely complete their errand within a year, perhaps two. Yes, it all made sense now. The figure to her left shifted his weight, distracting Sakura in her hyper-aware state. She turned her head.

She stopped breathing.

Dark eyes, dark hair, and delicate features turned to face her—but not Sasuke's, no. Sakura turned her head, and looked directly into the eyes of Itachi Uchiha. Like her, he was younger, but if she was right about *her* age, then Itachi ought to have been in his late teens. This wide-eyed boy couldn't be much older than her; his cheeks were soft and round, years away from the gauntness they took on after a life full of pain. He looked, in a word, completely shocked—but only for a moment; with the ease of a veteran actor, a solemn mask blinded her to his state of mind.

So *this* had been the Sage's plan. 'Meddling' was right. But as Sakura's heart filled with sorrow over the loss of Sasuke, the burning feeling in her chest intensified. Determination replaced grief. She could not waver. She could not fail. Not now. She owed it to Sasuke and Naruto, and all the world, to exploit every bit of this borrowed time, even if it meant being tied down to Itachi Uchiha. Given a choice between her love and her victory, there was no question which was the right answer.

Straightening her shoulders, Sakura leaned forward and bowed,

deeply.

“I accept this proposal, Grandmother. I am prepared to do whatever it takes to secure our future.”

“Very well. And you, Itachi Uchiha? Do you accept the terms of this proposal?”

It felt like an eternity passed before Sakura heard Itachi’s answer. “I accept this proposal. We will secure the future together.” The fine fabric of his montsuki-haori hakama rustled as he joined her in a low bow.

So that was it, then. The present was set, and the future was in her hands, now—in *their* hands. Itachi Uchiha, of all people...Sakura hadn’t seen this coming. Not by a long shot.

“Then it’s settled.” Satsuko closed her fan with a *click*. “The terms are accepted by all parties. May the ancestors bless us all.”

Sakura certainly hoped they would. Because she couldn’t resist, Sakura chanced a peek through the crook of her arm. Black eyes peeked right back at her, glittering with some emotion she couldn’t describe. From a guy like Itachi, it was arrogance at best and malice at worst. No matter. Sakura Haruno had every intention of saving the world. And she didn’t need help from some murderous pretty boy to get it done.

There was a dinner afterward: a ceremonial affair featuring traditional celebratory food from the Land of Honey—mead-soaked dried fruit, slow-cooked honeyed pork, pounded plantains, and other treats. But though the conversation flowed with comfortable ease, Sakura couldn’t be bothered to contribute, or even follow along. Itachi

occupied all of her attention—his placid visage, the way he looked at her more and more like a nuisance once the shock wore off. Worst of all was the way he sat almost carefree in her presence, as though she were neither a threat nor an equal. He probably had his own ideas on how to beat Kaguya, and thought them superior to hers on top of that, despite the fact that Sakura, not he, had faced her in battle. Well, he had a lot to learn.

If you botch this for us, Sakura thought as hard as she could in Itachi's direction, I will fuck you up. Count on it.

Itachi narrowed his eyes at her over the rim of his sake cup. *You can try*, those dark eyes taunted. *You can certainly try.*

Chapter End Notes

If you are looking to support me in other ways and/or see the weird things I reblog, I am [guiltyfandomtrashwonderland](#) on The Tumblr

A couple housekeeping things:

1. If you are reading this at ANY time, including the future, I always enjoy and welcome comments. There's something of a generational gap when it comes to online fandom behavior, and I've found that younger people treat places like ao3 with social media etiquette. I assure you, there is nothing weird about commenting on old work. Hell, if you come back for a reread feel free to comment about that.
2. I respond to every single comment regardless of content. Expect embedded gifs. They will happen. If you want to comment a gif, [follow these instructions](#).
3. For people who want to comment but for whatever reason don't know what to say, I usually put a few prompts at the end of each chapter. These are not assignments or expectations. They are simply options for people who want to let me know they read but do not have the brain to come up with a topic.
4. Please don't be a rude asshole in the comments. I don't need or want your criticism. Go read something else. Also, unless the

bookmark is private, authors can see your notes and tags on it. Bookmarking shit with stuff like “it’s okay” or “don’t like x, y, and z” is rude as fuck.

Child in the southern summer

Chapter Summary

In this chapter we cancel Itachi for being problematic and he deletes his Twitter

Chapter Notes

Wow, people sure like this. Well let's keep it up. Tell your friends. Tell your dad. Read this story to your coworkers over lunch.

An info-dumpy chapter; going forward there will be more punching and kicking and general tomfoolery. Please enjoy the larval stage of badass, cool-headed, confident Sakura. Here we see her emerging from the time egg, constantly two seconds from a breakdown having been plucked unceremoniously from a horrific existence with no time to process anything. Please enjoy Itachi, also two seconds from a breakdown, who possesses the social-emotional IQ of a roly-poly and doesn't understand why people would get angry at His Plan, which is Objectively the Best Plan. Explosion vs implosion: who will win

I mess with some minor details regarding fourth war canon and the order of events

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Everything was wrong.

Itachi's family was alive and well. His parents, proud of his successful engagement, treated him to a breakfast featuring all of his favorite foods. Sasuke, a sweet, earnest boy of twelve, had never known a life of trauma and impossible expectations. Shisui, now almost twice Itachi's age, walked the earth with two Sharingan eyes and a smile on his face. How had these things come to pass? Why? And what business was it of Itachi's that he'd been forced into this world to bear witness to its discrepancies?

Everything was wrong.

No. Everything was right. *He* was wrong.

Hidden away in a less-traveled corner of the Uchiha Clan compound, Itachi crouched in the darkness and grieved. It felt inappropriate, somehow, to reflect on his transgressions—to meditate on sins that no longer had a purpose. For to this world, none of his sins were tethered. He alone carried the weight of responsibility. His avoidance confused everyone; to them, his behavior was cause for concern, rather than fear. Shisui was convinced Itachi's troubles came down to lovesickness. His parents were baffled, and implored him to rest. And his brother—oh, *god*, his brother—

Last night, after they'd come home, Sasuke had been the first to find his brother in the darkened corner. Wearing a teasing grin, he'd dragged his older brother from the darkness, pulling him into the light. This Sasuke couldn't have known that Itachi crouched over the very spot where their parents' bodies bled out, staining the antique floors a rusty brown forever.

"Hey, Itachi. I got some of that stuff mom keeps at the back of the pantry. Let's get out of here."

"Sasuke—"

"Come on, come on. Just two shots. We're old enough."

"I—"

"Okay, one shot."

Sasuke stole his breath away. Sasuke, sweet Sasuke, looked at him with unadulterated love and admiration. That hurt most of all. And yet, the world kept turning. The future loomed, impossible to ignore. And now, on top of everything else, Itachi had the girl to consider. Sakura Haruno: his brother's teammate, defender, and possible lover.

Had he been sent here alone, Itachi thought as he watched a bug amble across the wooden floors, he'd have been much better off. In the few short hours since his rude awakening and the present moment, Itachi had already concocted three solid plans to prevent Kaguya's awakening. There was neither time nor necessity to involve the girl in his plans. She...complicated things.

Itachi had crossed paths with her before, on more than one occasion. Each time, she'd proven to be an obstacle, but never to the level of a threat. The final confrontation had occurred during the Fourth War; a chance encounter that left all parties with more questions than answers.

But perhaps she'd changed. Perhaps her years with the Slug Princess had sharpened a blunt instrument into a sword. But there was only so much meddling one could inflict upon low quality steel before it failed. Combat proficiency aside, emotional instability remained Sakura's most troublesome trait. Whatever problems the girl hadn't been able to cry away, she'd attacked with fury. Impulsiveness, selfishness, and shortsightedness: hardly qualities Itachi wanted in a mission partner.

A group of children thundered by; Itachi held his breath as they passed, and tried not to wonder if he'd killed them, or if they hadn't been born yet. Drawing his legs up to his chest, he pressed his forehead against his knees until it hurt. The pain grounded him, and his thoughts spiraled anew.

The Sage of Six Paths. Hagoromo Ōtsutsuki. This had been *his* doing. In that dark, eternal space between living and dying, he'd implored Itachi to take advantage of his healthy body—a *gift*, the Sage called it—in order to save the world from destruction.

In Itachi's opinion, the path forward was crystal clear: he'd extract from the girl every bit of information she had on fighting Kaguya and the Zetsu, and once that was finished he'd use this body, unblemished by chronic sickness, to end the war before it began. The only real question was whether it would be best to destroy Kaguya's methods for resurrection, or to allow her resurrection and kill her then; the former would be easier, but the latter would ensure that no future endeavor could be made to bring her back.

It was all very simple. Sakura would be useful, inasmuch as she stuck to field medic protocol: stay out of the way, and support when needed. Otherwise, she'd become a hindrance. Sakura had fought the Rabbit Princess and been privy to key information towards the end of the war, but Itachi had spent years with the Akatsuki. He had no ill will towards the girl—none of this was *personal*—but working together every step of the way would only slow him down.

The glare she'd leveled on him for the entirety of last night's dinner certainly supported Itachi's inclination towards solo work. For Sakura, this was *very* personal. It was obvious that she, like many before her, despised him to his core. It was best to get things over with quickly, and spend the rest of his life avoiding her at home.

At *their* home, he corrected himself. Inch by inch, Itachi unfurled his legs and slid down the wall, until he lay spread-eagle on the floor. *Their* home. The home that they'd make together—here, in the compound. She'd been handed a choice, and she'd chosen *him*. Had the Sage seen this, too? Was he out there somewhere in a world beyond this one, laughing? More questions Itachi had no time to find answers to. For now, he planned to continue his reconnoiter, deal with Sakura next, and see to the fate of the world last.

This wasn't about animosity or bad blood. It was about practicality. And it certainly wasn't about *love*, whatever the hell the Sage had meant by that. Itachi already loved his brother, his clan, and his country. That was more than enough love to spread around. Itachi had no spare bits of love to give. Certainly Sakura would agree with him on that count, if nothing else.

Being a child was hard, Sakura reflected. Being a child twice was even harder. She woke up the morning after dinner in her grandmother's tent—a large, sturdy structure perfect for trading on the road—in a pile of fine quilts, greeted by a retainer holding a steaming cup of oolong tea. For a while, Sakura simply sipped at the tea and scanned the room, forcing herself to catalog everything she saw in an attempt to settle her nerves. A medic needed to evaluate a scene quickly but accurately, and Tsunade had drilled the habit into her through a training method she called “mind-numbing repetition.”

Sakura looked. Though she hadn't had many years with her grandmother the first time around, certain things felt familiar. She didn't recognize the sight of the tent itself, but the smells within resonated powerfully: roasting cardamom, old silk, varnish, honeycomb, and incense shot her straight through the heart, bringing back faded memories Sakura hadn't recalled in years. Bees rolled lazily through the air, sticking to the edges of the tent to avoid the smoke rising from the fire in the main room.

Everything was different.

“Are you well, Sakura-san? Is the tea to your liking?”

“I am. It is. Thank you.”

“There are crepes, if you’d like some.”

“With—?”

“Lavender? Of course. Your favorite.”

Everything was the same.

Satsuko sent her beloved granddaughter off with a hair pin the length of Sakura’s hand, made of twenty-four karat gold. A bee of yellow diamond, polished onyx, and pearly detailing decorated the head. Sakura could have probably handed over the pin as full downpayment on a house. And here it was, sitting in her palm, twinkling decadently in the flickering firelight.

“For you, my love. The one you told me you always liked: something beautiful for a beautiful girl.”

“Thank you, Grandmother.” Sakura hid her tears in the elaborate folds of Satsuko’s traveling cloak. “I’ll keep it safe.”

“Off you go. There’s a whole world waiting for you out there.”

Sakura stepped out of the tent, and into her new life.

Thankfully, Sakura’s parents—and were they, really? *Her* parents?—didn’t question her absentmindedness. The whole way back to

Konoha, Mebuki and Kizashi chattered excitedly up ahead while Sakura lingered at the back, lost in thought. They traveled on *horseback* of all things, because apparently the Sakura of this time owned a speckled pony named Nutmeg.

So. She was engaged to Itachi Uchiha. That was fine. Shocking? Unexpected? Absolutely. But fine. His must have been the ‘eyes’ the Sage had mentioned. That made sense; from what she gleaned in the final hours of the war, the Sharingan and its many forms were almost singularly responsible for humanity’s woes: they controlled tailed beasts, they activated demonic statues, they ensnared the world in eternal dreams. They probably also sliced, diced, and sent you home with a brand-new set of kitchen knives, no money down.

That meant her first order of business was locating the rat bastard himself. She’d start at the Clan compound and work her way out from there. Knowing Itachi, he had to have at least a couple dedicated spots earmarked for lurking menacingly.

That’s not fair, the reasonable part of her chided. *You already knew something didn’t add up with him before we got sent here.*

Shut the hell up, Sakura told herself. She was barely clinging to sanity as it was. If she started falling into what-if holes, she’d wind up falling in one so deep she wouldn’t see the sun again.

But she couldn’t stop obsessing over it. And it was better, in many ways, to obsess over Itachi Uchiha rather than give herself over to grief for the people she’d left behind. Snippets of memories kept popping up in her mind—Naruto’s unusually somber mood in the Land of Iron, and the meaningful glances she’d seen pass wordlessly between Naruto, Obito, and Sasuke in the midst of battle. Naruto had told Sakura the strangest thing once they’d united on the battlefield with Obito newly on their team. There’d been no time for arguing, but Sakura had demanded to know why Obito, of all people, suddenly deserved their trust.

"Things aren't how we thought they were, Sakura," Naruto said. Covered in sweat and blood, he looked at Sakura with the oldest eyes she'd ever seen. "With Sasuke, and Itachi, and the Uchiha...all of it. I'm sorry."

At one point in her life, Sakura might have demanded clarity come hell or high water. But they'd been ass-deep in Zetsu and resurrected troops at the time, so Sakura took Naruto's brevity on faith. The lack of information had been irritating, but not unbearable. Had they won that war, Sakura might have forgotten the matter entirely, given enough time. Because what reason would she have to pour over an issue most everyone else closed the book on long ago? It wouldn't have done anyone any good, least of all Sasuke.

But then she'd met Itachi's resurrected body on the battlefield.

She wasn't supposed to have been there. But she was. There'd been an explosion, and then another, and then she'd been separated from the team, and...there he'd been. Standing upright, arm in arm with Nagato, both of them staring her down with those unsettling, corpse-like eyes that all the resurrected troops had worn.

"Sakura."

Itachi had greeted her. *Greeted her.*

"Why did you do it?" She'd snapped at him. Because hell, if she was here and about to be killed by one or both of these monsters, at least she'd go to the afterlife with the answers Naruto hadn't handed over.

Itachi hadn't requested clarification. He knew. "The Uchiha Clan's demise was inevitable," he'd told her. Juxtaposed with her sharp-

edged stance and hyperalert demeanor, Itachi possessed all the calm of a cat napping before a fire. “There are some traps that, once triggered, are impossible to stop.”

“Bastard. Just say you did it because you wanted to know how it felt.”

He’d closed his eyes. Opened them again. “Thank you. For looking after my brother.”

And then he was gone.

Was there even a *point* worrying over it? If she’d been sent to some timeline where the massacre *had* happened, at least she could’ve counted on ferreting the truth out somehow. Now she had nothing to go on but faith. Faith, and...love, apparently, according to His Meddlesomeness.

And the Sage wouldn’t have sent her back in time with an *unrepentant* mass murderer, would he?

Okay. Fine. So Itachi’s past was complicated. But even *if* Sakura considered all the variables, Itachi still had his fair share of sins. The fact that he’d spared Sasuke did not justify Sasuke’s pain. Had he needed to taunt Sasuke for so many years? Had he needed to break his arm, hospitalize him, torture him? No and no.

Sakura dug her heels into Nutmeg’s flanks, riding for the gates at a full canter. It didn’t matter. None of it fucking mattered anymore. The world she’d left was gone, gone, gone forever. In an emergency, a field medic made due with the resources at hand. To cling to principle in times of desperation was the act of the soon-to-be-deceased—or, at the very least, the soon-to-be-fired. Sakura knew how to adapt. Obito had come over to their side, in the end. Why not Itachi? Maybe she’d been

wrong about him entirely. Maybe the massacre was all one big conspiracy and Itachi'd had nothing to do with it.

Maybe he was a good person, right down to the core. After all, in this strange world all they had was one another. Maybe the Sage was right, and they would fall in love eventually.

And maybe hell would freeze over first.

Nobody at the Uchiha compound had the slightest idea where their errant heir had wandered. Naturally. Sakura wandered the uchiwaled streets, taking in the chaos of pure life all around her: cheerful colors, lines of laundry, aunties and uncles lingering on porches, handing out sweets to children. It was all so different from the empty neighborhood filled with ghost houses she and her friends dared one another to touch over lunch recess.

Arms full of spontaneous gifts and heart full of earnest congratulations, Sakura headed home to regroup. This took longer than usual; in this timeline, the continued support from the Haruno family's foreign enterprises meant her parents hadn't had to downsize. Rather than live squished between minuscule townhomes, Sakura's parents occupied a large, airy estate right next door to the Aburame Clan's main house.

Moving quickly to make up for lost time, Sakura piled the gifts on the bed and changed into something more suitable for ground work. Her old red qipao was nowhere to be found; all the familiar reds were exchanged for blacks and yellows—the color of bees. She pulled on a dandelion tunic over a pair of black leggings, tied a pouch of basic tools to her thigh, and jumped out the window before her parents—the *other* Sakura's parents—came calling. It was only midmorning, so surely Sakura would find everything she needed by the end of the day.

A quick stop at the archives bore no fruit and caused a great deal of frustration. All she'd wanted was a few seconds to browse the past few years' administrative reports. Sakura did not have the *time* to suffer the inevitable scrutiny should she go around asking people things like, 'Hey, how come the entire Uchiha Clan isn't dead?' But Sakura had forgotten one critical detail, which was that random 13-year-old genin did not enjoy the clearance levels required to review admin reports.

Now she knew nothing *and* she was pissed *and* she still didn't know where Itachi had gone off to. That little twat was *actively avoiding her* and for that he deserved a chakra-spiked punch to the solar plexus.

"Try the Forest of Death," the archivist suggested. Sakura ceased her rant mid-word and whipped her head around. An audience of a few curious staff members had formed, and Sakura experienced the epiphany that going around cursing Itachi's name in public was not, perhaps, the smartest course of action.

"Huh?"

"He likes going in there to train." And now that Sakura looked closer, she could see the little uchiwa pin affixed to the archivist's shirt collar. Mother of fuck. "Careful, though. Genin aren't allowed inside, normally. But maybe getting in a fight with your fiancé is considered an extenuating circumstance." The archivist grinned. Sakura bit the inside of her cheek and willed her face not to turn red. "Good luck."

"Yeah," Sakura muttered. She scurried from the room like the world's most shameful spider. "Thanks."

At the southern entrance to the Forest of Death, Sakura crouched under a nearby tree and considered her options. So far, spontaneity

had not been her friend. If she wanted any chance of finding Itachi in that godforsaken jungle, planning was a must. She contemplated summoning a slug or two as backup, but there was no telling if the intricate sealwork involved in summoning contracts knew how to handle dimensional mix-ups. Summoning without something on the other end was dangerous—she could get an offended slug at best, and some anonymous murder-beast at worst. She contemplated acquiring backup in human form, and abandoned that idea before it fully formed; privacy was essential here.

That left going alone—not the best option, but the only one given the alternatives. Sakura swept back her long hair, secured the bun with the golden pin, and jumped the fence the second the guard's back was turned.

Itachi observed the girl's progress from high in the trees. Feeling quite secure in his home territory, he'd left most of his tools at the compound, opting instead for the bare essentials. He wore no armor, and hadn't even activated his Sharingan. A quick test of his physical strength at home confirmed what the Sage had promised: he was in perfect health. The disease that had first appeared around age ten in the form of occasional coughing fits and negligible dizzy spells was gone. Air filled his lungs and left without a stutter. It was luxurious after a life dreading the sight of blood in the sink.

Itachi was lucky: not only was his current body strong, but he'd also kept his Sharingan. Whoever this Itachi had been—if there *had* been another Itachi that his soul had evicted—he'd had proper training. There were still kinks to work out; something felt a bit off around his eyes, but he chalked it up to the lack of chakra degradation that came with years of Mangekyo use.

Sakura, it would seem, had not bothered to assess her current abilities. Currently, she was engaged in a fierce, one-sided battle with a giant tiger; the tiger was winning. Most likely, she'd assumed that her

stamina, chakra reserves, and techniques had traveled with her. Curiously, Sakura lacked the monstrous strength for which her mentor was so famous. Itachi had never been privy to the fine details of the technique, but he'd assumed that chakra precision, not quantity or quality, was what mattered most. But if Sakura's successive looks of horror were any indication, that was far from the case. Interesting.

Despite her debilitating setbacks, however, Sakura did not give up. She'd been smart enough to pack a full kit, and after emptying damn near all of it, she'd exhausted the beast to the point that it ambled off in search of less troublesome prey. With a loud groan and a childish kick to the nearest rock, Sakura collapsed on the forest floor and began shoving her tools back into the pouch with dangerous imprecision. Now *that* Itachi wouldn't allow without comment. He dropped out of the trees and landed before Sakura with a gentle *tap*.

"Your blades will dull more quickly if you store them like that."

He'd been ready to say more—because, to be frank, if she was going to store her wire so carelessly, she might as well throw it away—but pedantry came second to avoiding the fist careening towards his throat.

"*What*," Sakura huffed, standing and cocking her other fist for a second strike, "The *hell* are you doing in here? I hope you're not about to say you were just watching me the whole time," she let out a breathless laugh that was anything but humorous, "Because if you seriously just sat back and watched me almost get mauled by a tiger, then I hope the Sage has a backup body for you lying around somewhere in the afterlife."

There came a pause, as Sakura grabbed her knees and finished catching her breath. An oddly vulnerable position to put oneself in, Itachi thought, staring at the back of her neck. Especially for someone so intent on finding him dangerous. But perhaps she, too, hadn't yet found the time to let her fate sink in.

“You made good use of your resources,” Itachi remarked. He knew it would earn him no favors with her, but it felt dishonest not to acknowledge her technical success. Weak as her current body was, she’d used her clever mind to make up for the gaps in strength. It wasn’t a strategy he needed personally, but it was still admirable. “Once you realized your techniques wouldn’t save you, you used the forest and your small size to tire it out.”

As he predicted, Sakura rewarded Itachi’s observations with a hate-filled glare. Itachi held his tongue, and waited for the next accusation. The girl obliged him.

“Look,” she spat. “He wouldn’t have sent us back together if we weren’t supposed to work together. What did the Sage tell you?”

Itachi raised his chin—it was a bit uncouth to sink to postural baiting, but part of his strategy lay in accumulating as much privileged information as possible, as quickly as possible. Whatever Sakura knew, Itachi needed to know as well. And then, once all intel had been squared away, he would ensure Sakura understood why it was in everyone’s best interest that she stay close to home as a supporting member of the team.

“That’s quite personal, isn’t it?”

A muscle twitched in Sakura’s jaw. The fist tightened.

“But,” Itachi allowed, “I imagine he told you a similar story. Wrongs must be righted, the beauty of second chances...” *Love...* “...and anything else he found necessary to manipulate us into doing his bidding.”

The fist lowered. Slightly. “What, you think he’s tricking us?”

“I don’t. But that doesn’t mean we aren’t being manipulated. The fact remains that we were hand-selected to return to this place: a world the Sage has already forced into a different shape.”

“Okay,” Sakura said. “Okay.” For a heartbeat she glanced away, but then her eyes snapped right back to his face—not into *his* eyes, but somewhere around his mouth. Smart. “So, look, if we’re going to do this, we have to trust one another. More than we do now, anyway.”

“I agree.”

“So you can start by answering my question.”

Ah. This. Itachi took a deep breath. Cooler heads would prevail here. “As I told you before...”

With impressive accuracy, Sakura aimed the second punch directly at his groin. He caught her fist halfway there. And, despite all the promises he’d made to himself to keep his composure, Itachi found his irritation rising. So *stubborn*.

“I know you aren’t so foolish as to believe a question like that matters here.” Itachi grit his teeth. “You have no way of proving or disproving anything I tell you. I’ll save us both time saying nothing at all.”

“Something isn’t *right* with your past. Naruto knew something. Obito *told* him something. The truth, I’m guessing. And he wouldn’t tell me. If it doesn’t matter, then tell me what happened.”

“I won’t.”

“Why? I *deserve* to know. I spent years looking after Sasuke because of things *you* did to him. The least you could do is tell me why instead of keeping up this heartless bastard schtick just because it’s what you’re used to.”

Itachi felt a scowl forming on his face, and forced his expression back into nothingness.

“If that’s what you think of me, perhaps there isn’t any point one way or another.”

“You could at least *pretend* like you care.”

“Would that satisfy you? Should I bleed in front of you to prove I’m alive?”

Her disdain burned. He could feel it in the air between them like a cloud of noxious fumes. Itachi readied himself for a third strike, or perhaps a kick. But something in Sakura’s eyes wavered, and she stepped away. One, two steps—no, half a step back. Not close, but something like it.

“Fine,” she muttered. “Fine. You’re—all right, then tell me what you know.”

“What I know...?”

Sakura threw her arms out, gesturing at the Forest of Death, Konoha, and all the world beyond it. "This place. I tried going to the archives and got kicked out because I don't have any clearance. What have you seen? I know you've been looking, too. Is Obito around? Zetsu? Madara? Tons of people who should be dead are alive. What's different?"

"I'm not sure," Itachi said. "I haven't been able to look into those matters. Not yet."

"That's extremely helpful. Good job. A-plus recon, captain."

This girl. For years, Itachi had been on the receiving end of the vilest insults, the most acidic vitriol, and the most passionate loathing. But saving Sasuke, Itachi had never felt such an urge to defend himself as he did now. It had been a long time since anyone felt comfortable enough to dislike him to the point of irony. It made him feel almost... argumentative. Defensive. He'd given up on defending himself to others over a decade ago. What was it about her that riled him so easily? That sort of ability was dangerous, coming from this woman in particular. If she saw an opening, she'd take it. Best to keep her at arm's length.

But Itachi knew he'd let go of his composure just enough to be noticeable when Sakura threw her hands up in the air.

"What? Don't sulk at *me*. I'm stuck in the same boat you are. If you're gonna kill me, kill me. I know you can. I know I can't stop you. What, exactly, do I have here to lose?"

Itachi sighed. "I'm not divulging half-formed ideas to you. My suspicions will benefit neither of us. Until I leave the village and

return with information, you will have to wait.”

“Oh.” Sakura’s arms fell limp at her sides. “We’re leaving? When are we leaving? You can just *do* that? Leave the village for a personal mission?”

“Of sorts. My status as heir of a noble clan means requests for things like training missions tend not to attract much scrutiny. *I*,” Itachi emphasized, “can leave the village with more subtlety than most.”

Silence. A calm before the storm. Itachi sighed, and braced himself for the inevitable.

“If you think for one *second* that I’m going to let you run around out there *alone*, and I’m going to stay here like some sort of home team—”

But that wasn't what he'd meant at *all*— Against his better judgement, Itachi took half a step closer. Couldn't this girl see they had no time for these petty disagreements?

“This has nothing to do with your value as a team member; it is because you—”

“—only one here who actually fought Kaguya was *me*, and—”

“—me what you know, then the intel can be pooled and tasks given to the stronger—”

“—rich coming from *you*, the guy who doesn’t trust anyone but—”

“—what you were meant to do is support your teammates, who—”

“—the *hell* he meant about love or whatever, unless that was his idea of a—”

“—unable to use even the most basic chakra precision techniques—”

“—can adapt, unlike you, apparently, because you just know everything and—”

The tiger returned, startling Sakura in the process, took one look at the scene before her, and slunk off into the woods again. This time, before Sakura could build up steam again, Itachi grasped her by the forearm to emphasize his sincerity. She stared at the offending contact as though already concocting plans to burn her arm off the instant she got home.

“Sakura,” Itachi said. “If there are things you know about Kaguya’s return, anything at all—things you saw, or that Obito told you—then I need to know what those are. That, I hope you understand, is what’s most important right now. Not dividing tasks. Sharing information is paramount.”

“If I tell you...” Sakura’s eyes flickered up to his, then back down again. Logic and reasoning had not swayed her. But perhaps, with an appeal to her emotions...

“Whatever you must think of me, remember that it was my world that ended, also. I have no desire to see this one meet the same fate.”

It wasn't a lie; it was anything but. Green eyes burned fiery holes into the tops of his feet, unmoving. But then something deep within Sakura shifted; Itachi felt it in the way her entire body slackened in one big sigh.

"I don't trust you," she finally said. "But I have to trust that the Sage sent you here for a reason, just like he did me. We don't have to *like* each other, but..."

"I will not betray your trust."

"Better not," she muttered. But she reached into her pack, pulled out a slim journal, and held it in both hands. "I wrote down everything I remembered. It's in a couple other places, too, but I made this, so that..." She shifted her weight from foot to foot. "...So that I could give it to you. Because I figured at least one of us should know, if... something happens."

"Thank you," Itachi said. The journal found its way into his favorite pocket. The next course of action Itachi did not relish, but it had to be done. Sakura would understand. Eventually. "When I return from my mission, I will update you. I may be gone for some time. A month, perhaps."

A flush like a red-hot brand started at the tip of Sakura's nose and spread across every inch of exposed skin.

"Oh, you stupid, sneaky little cu—"

Itachi flickered away with a one-handed sign. There was no point in lingering to hear the rest of that sentence. It was one he'd heard many times before.

Screaming in fury and punching a tree did not bring Itachi back. But it did manifest two chuunin, who flickered into the clearing wearing a matching pair of shit-eating grins.

“Trouble in paradise already?” One of the chuunin poked her with a playful elbow. Sakura managed not to rip out a chunk of his flesh with her teeth, but only just.

“Yeah, we saw you guys yellin’ at each other on the cameras.” The second chuunin jabbed a thumb at a bush that looked exactly like all the other bushes. “Looked intense. What were you fighting about? Ow. Dude, don’t slap me right over the nipple like that.”

“Sorry about this one, Sakura-san. Wasn’t raised right. Might we offer the lady an escort back to civilization?”

Yes. And after that, a drink with the highest alcohol content this stupid little body could handle.

“Yeah. Sure. Not like I’m doing anything else today.”

“Come on, turn that frown upside down. Where’s your shadows?”

Sakura tilted her head. “Naruto and Sasuke?”

“Do you have other shadows? Ow.”

“Don’t be rude, man.”

At last, a chance to get information from people who probably wouldn’t give a shit. “Where are Sasuke and Naruto this time of day, usually? I haven’t caught up with them lately.”

“Not sure about Uchiha-san, but the Hokage usually trains with his son on mornings your team doesn’t have missions. Probably done by now, though.”

“The Hokage’s son...? Are you talking about Asuma-sensei?”

The chuunin looked at one another, then back at her. “The Fourth, of course,” the nipple-puncher said. “Minato Namikaze. Man, you must’ve hit your head when you fought that tiger. You good?”

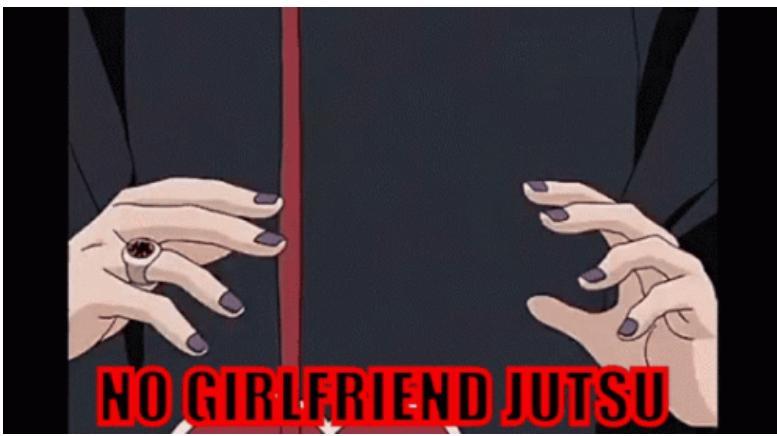
“What.”

Chapter End Notes

Tonight: local dumbass protagonists fight to the death using pool noodles, reverse psychology. More at 10.

1. If Itachi was from Kentucky, do you think he would've "oh bless your heart"-ed Sasuke instead of blabbing on about hatred? "Bless your heart" can kill
2. Bees are cool. Discuss
3. Who needs therapy the most
4. WHAT is Mikoto keeping at the back of that pantry

Itachi, every day in front of the mirror:



look he can't date people or they'll find out his silent man thing is because he's awkward as fuck

Stalking prey, I propped up the flap

Chapter Summary

In this chapter Sasuke is forced to read a book and, following in the footsteps of his idol Kylie Jenner, Itachi Realizes Things™

Chapter Notes



For the poetically interested, the work title and chapter titles (as well as some major themes) come from the poem “Catching Rabbits” by Robin S. Chapman.

Tw: suicide mention

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The escort back to civilized society took a mere ten minutes, but for Sakura, that was all the time she needed to work herself up into a blinding fury. By the time the chuunin dropped her off at the southern entrance to the Forest, they’d gone silent, their good humor replaced with wariness. They did not linger for goodbyes. In a trance, Sakura made her way to the Hokage tower, ignoring every greeting in favor of marinating in her rage.

He’d left her behind. He’d used her for information, watched her struggle without lifting a finger to help, and then he’d left her behind. The feeling of betrayal was not novel—in the world Sakura left

behind, she'd run out of appendages to count trespasses by age fourteen—but it cut far deeper than she was prepared for. Before, she'd always had other connections, other relationships to turn to when social warfare took unfortunate turns. Here, she was alone; here, she had no history. People knew her, but though their faces looked familiar, their hearts were not the same. These were not her people. This was not her Konoha.

Sakura had no one. Itachi had no one. *They* had no one—no one but one another. And now she didn't even have that. Pursuit was pointless; Itachi was faster than her, stronger than her, and smarter than her—he'd told her as much, more or less, in the Forest. Bastard.

Well, she'd been meaning to catch up to Naruto—Naruto *Namikaze*—and Sasuke, anyway. She'd just hoped for a happy reunion, one filled with smiles and hugs, not scowls. More, "It's been too long! I love you both more than I can say!" and less, "Sasuke, your arrogant, shithead fuck-ass of an older brother is god's greatest mistake. Two times over. Anyway, hi. Hello. How's it going?"

"Sakura-san," the guard greeted her at the top of the stairs. "You're right on time. Your teammates are waiting for you in the Hokage's office."

"Okay."

"Nice day today!"

"Yeah."

"Congratulations on your engagement."

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Let me get the door for you.”

“Thanks.”

“I love your outfit! It’s a great color for you.”

“Thanks.”

Minato Namikaze—shinobi god, tragic hero, Naruto’s father—glanced up when Sakura entered the room. The *scritch, scritch* of the fountain pen in his hand fell silent, as did the murmur of conversation emanating from her left. For ten whole seconds, Sakura forgot to breathe. Her anger towards Itachi, her bitterness towards her frail body, and the fate of the world itself briefly took a back seat as she beheld the Fourth—who was, Sakura now knew, the hottest man to have ever walked the face of the earth. The textbooks hadn’t done him justice. The stone outcropping bearing his visage was a *crime* juxtaposed with the original material.

Minato gave her a smile. “There you are, Sakura. We were starting to worry.” He held up the piece of paper he’d been writing on: a mission brief, now signed.

“Ah,” Sakura said.

“Ah, indeed.”

Silence. Minato blinked. Beautifully.

Someone coughed. Sakura did not look away. Only Naruto himself, human whirlwind in name and body, held enough power to break the spell: he barrelled into Sakura like a mastiff—just as loud but twice as friendly. Over his shoulder, Sakura spotted Kakashi-sensei and Sasuke. Kakashi-sensei had his nose in a book of smut as usual, a sight so familiar it nearly drove Sakura to tears. Behind him, Sasuke lurked in a corner—but he was not brooding. He was reading. An enormous tome sat in his lap, the tattered edges suggesting several lifetimes of love.

“Sakura!” Naruto gave Sakura a backbreaking hug. “I hope you’re ready for a hard day’s work moving plants around in a greenhouse. I voted for the B-level because somebody needs to catch the Silver Creeper and it’s *gonna* be me—”

“Silver *Creature*,” Kakashi-sensei sighed. “Naruto, we’ve been over this.”

“—but *no* body listens to me. Ever. About anything.”

“You don’t get to vote on missions,” Sasuke said without looking up from his book. “That’s not how it works. That’s not how any of this works. Hey, Sakura.”

“I was about to mobilize an entire toad army to look for you,” Naruto continued, unbothered by the reality of hierarchical command structures. “‘Cause I thought you were still mad at me for last week. My mom says she’ll fix it and get it back to you in no time. Also, you missed a *lot* from Ichiraku night. That guy Genma was there with his new girlfriend and his old girlfriend came up and dumped his ramen *all* over his head. Akamaru started eating it right off of him, and then the new girlfriend dumped him. Genma. Not Akamaru. Also, also, I

forgot to bring the thing I borrowed from you. Sorry.”

Naruto’s *mom*? What? And Genma, he—*what*? What did she have that Naruto had needed to borrow? Sakura, completely overwhelmed—barely managed a: “Huh?” Maybe sometime in the near future she could have several hours to lie down and stare at a nice ceiling somewhere until things made sense again.

“Naruto.” Minato held up a finger. “You’re doing it again.”

Naruto snapped to attention and lifted his hand in an exaggerated salute. “Too much information! Sir! I’m sorry, sir!”

“Come on, you three.” Kakashi pocketed his book. “There are plants to move and only we can move them.”

“Yeah!” Naruto made a flying leap out of the window. Minato closed and locked it, aiming a pointed glare at his errant son, now cavorting away on rooftops. So at least *two* of her important people hadn’t changed all that much. Kakashi had the same sleepy, can’t-be-bothered demeanor he’d always worn outside a combat situation, and Naruto was as chaotic as always.

It was Sasuke, of all people, who gave Sakura pause. Of all the expressions she’d seen her Sasuke wear, none of them had been kind: her Sasuke smirked, grimaced, frowned, and snarled. He’d had too many walls up for softer communication. This Sasuke picked himself up off the floor, *smiled* at her, and held out the hand he wasn’t using to cradle his book.

While she waited for her brain to finish recalibrating, Sakura took his hand. She scanned Sasuke’s face, looking for—god, she didn’t know what. Recognition? It was there; of *course* it was there. But it was the

recognition from a Sasuke unmarred by war, agony, and curse seals. This Sasuke was not her Sasuke. Did this one love her? She wanted it, oh, god she wanted it...but while Sasuke looked at her with open affection, nothing about his demeanor suggested anything more than friendship. Grief assaulted her anew. Sakura had hoped, at the back of her mind, that Itachi had been a mistake, that the Sage *had* meant Sasuke and would shortly rectify his error. But this Sasuke was not her Sasuke. And he never would be.

“Let’s go.” Sasuke gave her hand a tug, as though holding hands was something they did every day. “We can catch up on the way.”

Sakura let Sasuke lead her out of the office, sparing one last look at Minato Namikaze over her shoulder. He gave her a little wave, and went right back to his paperwork.

“I know you’ve been hearing it all day,” Sasuke told her with a wry look halfway down the stairs, “but congratulations. Nobody at the main house went to sleep before two in the morning. We probably burned through enough sake to fill a lake. Uh,” Sasuke amended quickly, the tips of ears going ever-so-slightly pink. “Not me. I wasn’t drinking. I’m not allowed.”

Sakura gave him a smile. “Yeah, sure you weren’t.” It was extraordinarily easy to fall in with Sasuke like this: her passion for the man was not diminished, and she didn’t think it ever would, but this Sasuke was as simple to read as any book. He was not defensive, held no tension in his shoulders, and looked for all the world like any other thirteen-year-old boy getting dragged off to a greenhouse to move plants around for minimum wage. And speaking of books....

“What are you reading?”

“This?” Sasuke shifted the epic tome so that Sakura could read the

title. *Critical Elements of Wound Diagnosis, seventh edition*. “Oh, you know, just some light reading. The usual.”

Well, that was new: the reading *and* the subject matter. Sakura raised an eyebrow. “You’re thinking about going into medicine?” Because, you know, anyone *could*, she supposed. But this was Sasuke, for crying out loud.

“I’ve been looking into combat medic training, yeah.”

They reached the bottom of the staircase, and stepped into Konoha’s unforgiving afternoon summer heat. Up ahead, Sakura could see Kakashi-sensei sitting on a bench with his face in his hands. Before him, Naruto and Konohamaru were engaged in some sort of mutual face-slapping contest. Sasuke muttered unflattering comments about ‘idiots’ and ‘this shit again’ under his breath.

Everything was different. Everything was the same.

“So I’m not interested in a hospital career,” Sasuke continued, “but I can see the benefit of knowing more than how to stick a bandage on someone out in the field. My chakra control isn’t fine enough for something like surgery. But I could at least stabilize someone until they got real treatment.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. What got you interested?”

“My father bothering me about being a combat medic every fucking day of my life. ‘Sasuke, did you hear they’re doing first aid classes at the hospital again? You should go.’ ‘Sasuke, aren’t you tired of sharpening swords? Why not sharpen scalpels instead?’ Kill me.”

Sakura wrinkled up her nose. “You mean Fugaku?” The man behind the Uchiha Clan’s aspiring coup? *That* Fugaku?

“No, my secret father who hides under the sink when we have company over. By the way, you could make an effort not to check out Naruto’s dad in broad daylight. You’re a pre-married woman now. If we need to get the telescope out, just ask.”

Sakura rolled her eyes without thinking. But the smirk Sasuke shot back at her was full of warmth. A warm sensation burst into life in Sakura’s chest, as powerful as it was unfamiliar. No, she knew this feeling; it’d just been so long since she felt it that she’d forgotten its name.

Hope.

Several dozen miles away, Itachi Uchiha darted from tree branch to tree branch, following a direct path to an old Uchiha safehouse. This one hadn’t seen use in more than a generation, but if it was anything like the house from Itachi’s time, then it still held its fair share of secrets worth plundering.

During the war, another resurrected Uchiha mentioned the house as the home of a set of journals detailing the first contact the Uchiha Clan had with the entity called Zetsu. If that was the case, then the journals would make up a key part of Itachi’s strategy. The more he could do to destabilize Zetsu before a head-on confrontation, the better. To properly kill a weed, one first had to find the root.

Above him, a crow kept pace in the sky. Her name was Echo, and Itachi had approached her with a deal: help him on this secret mission, and in exchange he’d make her his primary companion. An

exclusive match with the Clan's heir was a lucrative position for a crow to find herself in, and Echo had jumped at the opportunity to assist him. Like others of her kind, she did not speak, but understood language both verbal and written. She was small and plain: perfect for undercover work. While Itachi investigated, Echo would keep watch outside.

Fifty meters from the house, Itachi stopped, and signaled for Echo to land. He pointed to a tree farther ahead, a large oak with a flock of blackbirds already resting in its branches. A perfect place to hide in plain sight. While Echo went on ahead, Itachi sank into a crouch. He'd intended to use this time to review mission objectives, but despite the fact he'd sworn not to, he found himself mulling over his fight with Sakura instead. Because it *was* a fight, Itachi admitted to himself. Rather than defuse the situation with the dispassionate manner he'd been known for, he'd let himself get pulled into an argument.

It wasn't as though Itachi never lost his temper from time to time. Everyone had a fuse, including him. He'd just thought it out of Sakura's reach. That was hardly the case, it turned out. A few snippy remarks from her and he'd been on the defensive, hackles raised at her callous behavior. Why she rankled him the way so many others hadn't, Itachi hadn't the faintest idea. At any point in their conversation, he could've activated his Sharingan and asserted control over the situation. He could've knocked her out, or put her through a genjutsu that convinced her of his truth.

But he hadn't. For some infuriating reason, her *approval* mattered to him—not her approval *of* him, since he knew that was out of reach forever. But he'd hoped for her tactical support. A grudging alliance was still an alliance. Now, it wasn't likely he'd ever have it. Better to work alone, and quickly, before she had a chance to mess everything up.

The house itself was dilapidated, given over to plant life and a swarm of pollinators feasting on the open blooms. There was still a roof, walls, and the implication of a door (really, a sheet of tarp nailed down). Beyond that, the house was empty—at least, to the untrained

eye. In the center of a former breakfast nook, Itachi knelt on the floor and ran his fingertips across the weathered wooden slats. His finger caught on an invisible knot.

Just one little pulse of fire chakra, the old Uchiha had said. Itachi pushed his chakra through the barrier. The outline of a trap door appeared in a spark of red and orange flames. Rich, woodsy smoke filled the air. With one last look around, Itachi lifted the door and descended the stairs into darkness, pulling an emergency light from his pack and cracking it. That plus the enhanced vision once he activated his Sharingan was enough to find his way through the gloom.

The tunnel led to a cavernous room, what looked like a natural cave carved by a river thousands of years prior. On every spare bit of wall, someone had chiseled out shelves; scrolls and books filled the spaces, stacked on top of one another or lined up side by side. In the center of the room were several desks, a simple laboratory, and a flame-blackened area that Itachi assumed had been used for testing fire jutsu. Everything was clean and orderly, albeit with a layer of dust; whoever had last lived or worked here had not left in a hurry.

In fact, Itachi suspected they hadn't left at all: towards the far end of the cavern sat a pile of human bones nearly waist-high. It wasn't until Itachi was practically standing on top of them that he noticed; they were partially hidden behind one of the desks, and in the low light he'd logically assumed oddly shaped rocks rather than human remains. But the elongated shapes, the dingy-white coloration, and the telltale humanoid skulls (eight from what he could see) left little doubt as to just what had happened to the former occupants of this safe house. The only question left was who had done it.

Itachi stepped forward, picked up the nearest bone, and examined it. Odd...there were indentations across its surface—across the surface of every bone he could see—consistent with the sort of marks one found on creatures devoured whole. Whatever had consumed these people had a set of very sharp teeth, closely arranged and attached to a relatively weak jaw structure. It was as though another human had

eaten them.

No. Not another human. Itachi *knew* these marks. He'd seen them too many times before to be mistaken. He dropped the bone on the pile, but by then it was too late to run for the entrance. With an echoing *thunk*, the trap door slammed shut. Lacking any other option but to fight, Itachi turned to face the center of the room, his back against the wall. He cursed his carelessness, but at the same time questioned it: how had he missed the signs of another occupant? His Sharingan could spot even the tiniest traces left by another living creature.

Bare footprints made tracks in the dusty floor, too many to have been ignored—and yet he hadn't seen them until just now, when he knew what to look for. The feeling of *wrongness* in his eyes returned with a vengeance, along with a headache that grew the more Itachi strained in the dim light. There were people in here—multiple people—had they been here the entire time, watching him? *How had he not seen them?*

Itachi moved. Tried to. But no matter how hard he tried, his legs wouldn't budge. He glanced at his feet to see the edges of a glowing circle, the characters for *trap* and *still* visible at the circumference. A paralytic seal. But whoever had activated it left his upper body mobile; he pulled two kunai from his pouch, and searched the room for his attacker.

"Oh, my," a voice murmured in the darkness. "How unfortunate."

"Don't feel sorry for it," another, identical voice countered. "It ought to have known better."

"So foolish to send the heir out alone." A third voice, as alike as the first two. "But then, two spares is a *bit* excessive. Perhaps it's for the best."

A net of vines studded with wicked spikes grew up and around Itachi, caging him. Luminous veins of chakra criss-crossed through the vines, creating a barrier that rebuffed the kunai sent flying right into it. Before the kunai hit the ground, Itachi released a flurry of fire-charged shuriken, which hit the spaces between the vines and bounced off. So it wasn't just a net: the chakra in the vines extended outward, joining up to form an impenetrable force-field. The weapons fell with a clatter onto the stone floor.

A strange, icy sensation Itachi refused to label 'fear' started at the top of his head and worked its way down to his feet. Normally, Itachi prided himself on his battle composure. More than once, he'd been called a stone-cold bastard by his opponents. It was the face that got to people. The more agitated they were, and the more fiery their temper, the more they lashed out at his apathy. Their anger made them sloppy, easy to control. Body language was a weapon wieldable as any sword.

But there was one crucial difference between those battles and this one: these opponents he could not see—not their bodies, nor the glow of their chakra. Save for their voices, they were invisible, and he had to squint to make out the chakra coursing through the vines. It didn't make sense—none of this made sense. Even towards the end of his life, Itachi's Sharingan had never failed him on such basic matters. Itachi's confidence was not without just cause, after all. His powerful Sharingan was the secret to the pride that so infuriated his opponents; no matter what, Itachi always, *always* had a trump card. Even here, in this impossible darkness.

Itachi activated his Mangekyo.

Tried to.

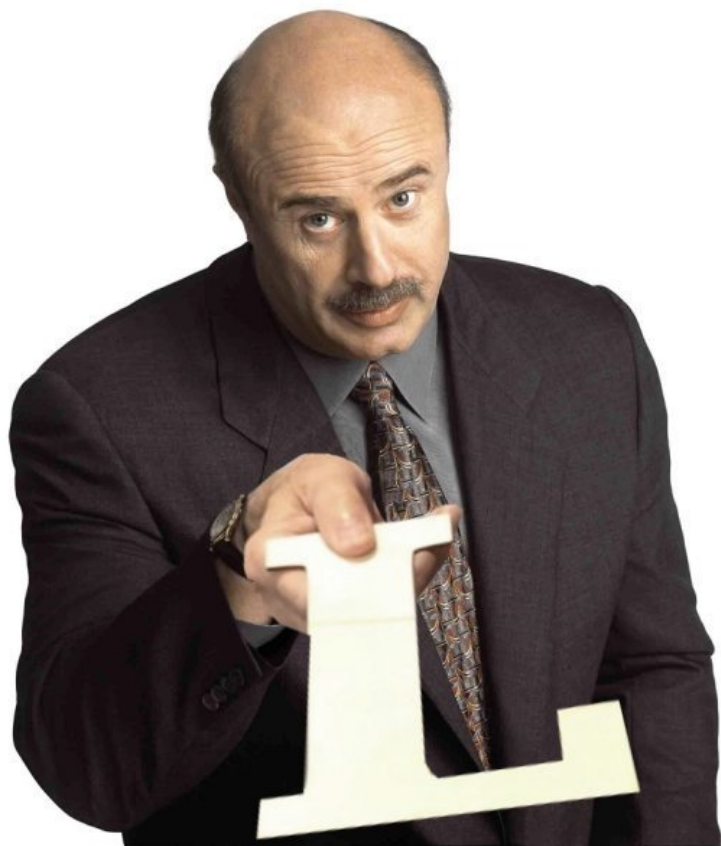
But the familiar rush of power, brilliant clarity, and pain that always

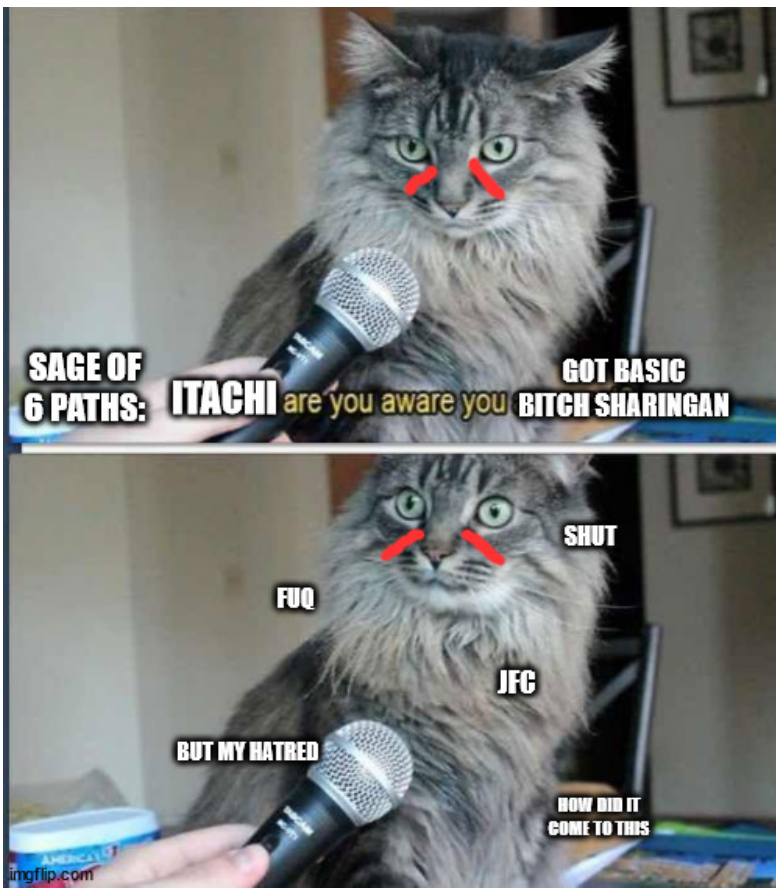
marked its activation were missing. What did arrive in its place was a wonderful, terrible realization: Itachi's Mangekyo was gone. No, not gone. It had never been there in the first place. Shisui, whose suicide had pushed Itachi's Sharingan over that horrible ledge, was alive in this world—alive and happy, living among a happy Clan. This Shisui had not been assaulted by Danzo for the want of his eyes. This Shisui had not done the unthinkable for Itachi's sake. There had never been a suicide. Not here.

Numb, hands shaking, Itachi reached into his pack and pulled out the small, round mirror intended for signaling. He held it up, and through the uncanny glow of the emergency light he saw the worst of his nightmares come to life: two Sharingan. Three tomoe. Nothing more.

“Hello,” said Zetsu. “I’ve been waiting so long for someone to visit me.”

Chapter End Notes





1. What do you think Sasuke should read next, Essentials of Toxicology 8 ed. or Practical Crying: a Resident's Guide?
2. Do you think Itachi would look good in some booty shorts that say "God Won't Let Me Die" on the back?
3. Who fucking called it

listen if you were here for the MadaSaku I stg I'm not turning this into another weird bird fic. Echo is just vibing

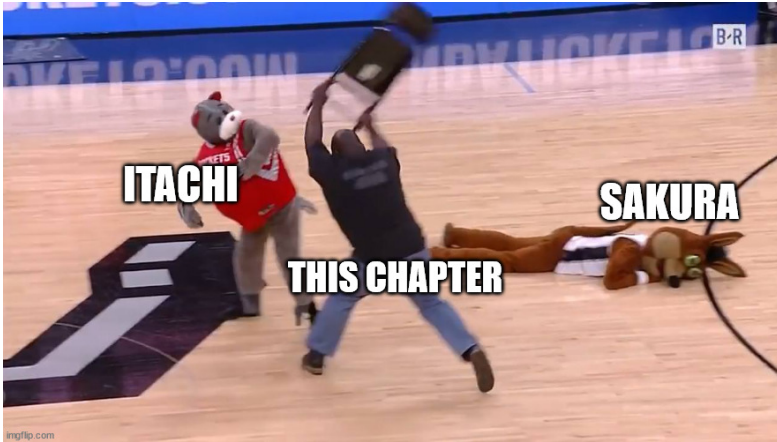
comments fuel my soul

With a crooked stick

Chapter Summary

In this chapter Sakura decides to switch careers from the MRS track, and then she and Itachi go on a date and come home past curfew

Chapter Notes



This chapter contains v i o l e n c e babes

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sakura spent the afternoon observing and plotting. Far from feeling frustrated by the menial drudgery of moving plants, she welcomed the chance to familiarize herself with Team 7's dynamics without the risk of getting caught staring. What she *really* wanted to do was observe a training session; that would net her the same information plus a sense of everyone's combat skills. If they were anything like her team, though, they'd hit up the training grounds after submitting paperwork. All she had to do was help complete this mission. The greenhouse they'd been assigned contained harmless plants, mainly culinary species with a few non-toxic medicinal plants like aloe. As a result, there was little reason to remain on guard.

She started with Kakashi-sensei. Jonin: check. Mask up: check.

Pornographic reading habits: check. Interestingly, Sharingan: check. At least, Sakura figured a Sharingan hid behind that lopsided band of his. That could only mean one thing: not only had Obito existed in this world, but he'd also presumably died—or “died”—and bequeathed his Sharingan before kicking the bucket. Obito Uchiha: check.

“Naruto,” Kakashi-sensei droned without looking up from his book. “We hold the planters with *both* hands.”

Naruto, currently attempting to balance a third pot on one arm, did not hold the planters with both hands. Kakashi-sensei did nothing to address this.

So. Naruto: a curious puzzle to solve, being in possession of both his parents. So far, it appeared his personality was the same. He was loud, chaotic, and confrontational in that fierce, but not unkind, way of his. But he did not appear to have a crush on her. Sakura's thirteen-year-old Naruto had spent most of his time protesting his love for her. She had no idea what to make of the change, other than a vague suspicion that his infatuation had been based on some insecurity that did not plague him here.

“Sasuke,” Naruto yelled across the greenhouse. “Look. Look, Sasuke. Sasuke, look.”

Sasuke, currently examining some herbs with great concentration, did not look. Sakura stood next to him and inched closer for a better view. Now, here was the most curious puzzle of them all: Sasuke Uchiha, one that spoke to her like a friend, gobbled up books—for Sakura could see a textbook and a novel poking out of his satchel—and, while reticent, did not sulk.

“But if you're both herbs,” Sasuke muttered to a thatch of parsley,

“why do you lose most of your taste when dried, and the rosemary doesn’t?”

“It’s something to do with the oils, I think,” Sakura said. “Some herbs don’t concentrate flavor well when dried.”

“Mmm.”

There were a million questions Sakura wanted to ask Sasuke directly. But even if this Sasuke didn’t shy away from conversation, that didn’t mean it was a good idea to request information outright on things she already ought to know. Nobody would identify her as a time traveler, of course, because time travel as a concept was absurd; that didn’t mean there weren’t risks to strange behavior, though. Most likely, everyone’s immediate thought would be ‘spy,’ and then she’d have to waste a bunch of time in an interrogation room when she ought to be finding Itachi, cussing him out, and beating his ass, in that order. Better to keep interactions simple.

They finished the mission without incident. But when the team left Naruto’s hot dad’s office and began meandering off in separate directions, Sakura stopped in her tracks. She raised a hand that no one saw.

“Hey,” she called out. Everyone looked at her over their shoulders. “Aren’t we going to train together?”

Sasuke raised an eyebrow. Kakashi did, too.

“Oh,” Naruto said. He scratched the back of his head. “Did you change your mind?”

So much for innocuous questions. “Change my mind about...what, exactly?”

“Well, you said that after your family finished the engagement stuff that you didn’t want to, you know, do serious missions and train and stuff.”

“Well, um.” Sakura felt her face heat up. *Shit. Shit.* “Yeah, I did change my mind. Isn’t it for the good of the team that I get stronger and help you guys?”

“Yes?”

And she was allowed to change her mind, wasn’t she? Kids changed their minds like Sakura’s mom changed up dinner: suddenly, sometimes with confusing results. If Konohamaru walked up to her now and said he wanted to leave Konoha to become a traveling bard, Sakura wouldn’t bat an eye. Team 7 continued eyeing her. Kakashi-sensei and Sasuke exchanged unreadable looks.

Sakura was spared from initiating possibly-catastrophic damage control by a large crow, which landed in the street near Sasuke. It began cawing at the top of its lungs and flapping its wings frantically. When Sasuke did not respond immediately, it flew to the top of Sasuke’s head and continued its fit there. For the first time all day, Kakashi-sensei closed his book and stowed it away in his weapons pouch.

“Sasuke?”

The crow took off and flew in circles above them. Sasuke paled. “It’s Itachi’s crow. I saw him talking to her this morning.”

Sakura felt her heart drop like an anvil into her stomach. “Does that mean...?”

“Itachi’s in trouble,” Sasuke said. The crow landed in the street again and bobbed her head in agreement. “He needs help.”

Minato took in the news with folded arms and a grave expression. This, Sakura would expect: if a shinobi of Itachi’s caliber had found himself in trouble, that could mean Konoha itself was in danger.

“And you’re sure,” Minato addressed Sasuke, “that this is his crow?”

“I’m sure.” Sasuke was still pale, and had begun to tremble in his hands. The crow, perched atop Minato’s head, bobbed again.

“Then we should leave right away,” Sakura said. “Shouldn’t we?” They should’ve left from right there in the street, actually, Sakura thought. Itachi had abandoned her on the pretense of searching for information on the rabbit princess and her botanical minions, among other targets. If locating Itachi meant uncovering that mission, then they’d *really* be fucked.

“Of course.” Minato reached in a desk drawer, pulled out a large, rolled-up piece of paper, and opened it on his desk: a map of the Five Nations and the many smaller countries between them. “Where was he last seen?”

The crow hopped onto the map and jabbed her beak on an area to the

northeast of Konoha. Minato studied the spot, frowning.

Kakashi-sensei leaned in for a better look. "Uchiha land?"

"That would appear to be the case." Minato put a hand to his chin, stroking a beard that wasn't there. "But it's not a remote area. What could have detained him there?"

"Missing-nin?"

Minato shook his head. "It's well within the boundaries of the detection seals. We, or any of our higher level sensors, would've detected an unfamiliar chakra signature if that was the case."

Sakura shifted her weight from foot to foot. Every minute they stood here in this office blathering was another second she spent agonizing over Itachi's fate. He might be hurt, bleeding out and taking his precious eyes with him. Or he might have skipped town for good, and the crow was warning them he'd run off.

Turning to Kakashi-sensei, she placed a hand on his arm, hoping the touch, if not her words themselves, would convey the depth of her concern. "Kakashi-sensei, I want to go, too. What should I bring with me?"

Everyone in the room, including the two chuunin assistants, gave Sakura a Look. Wonderful: she'd put her foot in her mouth *again*, and once again she had no idea why.

Kakashi-sensei put both hands on her shoulders. "Sakura," he said. "This isn't your fight. I know you're worried about Itachi. I know it's

hard to think about someone you love being in danger. But this mission isn't something you can handle."

"I'm afraid so." Minato gestured to the chuunin. One came forward and accepted a small scroll from him. "We'll send a team of specialists. Kakashi, Naruto, Sasuke, you three may follow and offer support."

"Wait," Sakura sputtered. "What about me?"

"Sakura." Kakashi hunched down, putting his face at her eye level. He looked...tired. Old, even. "This is more serious than you know. It's our duty to accept mission parameters meant to preserve everyone's safety. We promise we'll let you know when Itachi is safe."

Sasuke stepped forward, face even paler, gripping the hem of his shirt so hard his knuckles were white. "He'll be okay, won't he?"

"I'll make sure of it," Minato promised. He handed one final scroll to Kakashi before turning his gaze to Sasuke. "I won't let your parents lose another child. Not like this."

Sasuke took a step back, as did Sakura—so quickly she nearly tripped over her own feet in the process. Another *child*?

"You have ten minutes to prepare your team, Kakashi. Dismissed."

"Sir."

Sakura ran home the moment Team 7 passed the Hokage tower's outer doors. Behind her, she could hear Kakashi's question and Naruto's shout, but she didn't stop to respond or even wave. She burst through the gates to her family's estate, passing no less than five people that she didn't greet. In a time frame she'd have been proud of had it not been for the dire situation, she put together a kit. There'd been precious little time to test her chakra-based skills as fully as she wanted to, but surely some of her weapons-related muscle memory had accompanied her back in time.

Shuriken, kunai, wire, small explosives, standard issue tanto, smoke bombs...everything she could fit without compromising her balance, Sakura stuffed into her pouch and various holsters. She sent up a thank you to whatever was listening that at least this world's Sakura had the good sense to store weapons in her room. Stripping down in a flurry of limbs and swears, she replaced her bright clothing for dull greens and browns more suitable for sneaking.

Concerned questions from her parents were answered as brusquely as Sakura dared. There was little time to act, and once she came back from—from whatever the *hell* she was about to go do, she could explain then. Dinner had just been served; Sakura scarfed it down, deposited kisses onto heads, dashed back to her room, and climbed out the open window. It felt better than going out the front door; not really any less conspicuous, but the veneer of secrecy comforted her.

Genin were not allowed out of the village on martial business without explicit permission from the Hokage. Fine, then: she'd sneak out over the wall between guards. Her chakra control was still good, even if she wouldn't have the benefit of her byakugou and the outpouring of monstrous strength she had access to in a pinch. It was something. She knew plenty of earth style and medicinal chakra techniques that even a low-level grunt like her could manage. If deployed with cunning, they could at least serve as distractions.

Hopping the wall, Sakura landed on a nearby tree, ducking behind its

large branches; she wanted to get her bearings before running farther ahead. Sakura had a small, rolled map halfway out of her pouch when a massive bird collided with her in a whirlwind of feathers and muffled caws.

Itachi's crow. Sakura grabbed her as gently as she could, holding the pointed face with its sharp black eyes up to her face.

"Are you here to help me?" The crow nodded. "Good." Sakura released the crow. It hopped to a twig poking out above her head, and clacked its beak at her.

"Lead the way, friend."

The crow flew off. Sakura followed in hot pursuit.

Itachi hadn't spoken once since the cage went up. Without an obvious exit, his best bet was to remain calm and spend every bit of energy he could spare on devising an alternate escape route. Trickery might work where doujutsu would not.

"It doesn't matter if it won't talk," the Zetsu said. A white one, like the other two.

They'd wanted to know why he'd come, what he'd been searching for. He wouldn't tell them.

"Yes, yes," the second one said. "None of it matters, really. And

neither does it.”

“Good for eating, though.”

“Good for eating.”

A burning sensation drew Itachi’s attention to his arm. The pain was sharp, like a stab, but spread out evenly across his skin. He looked down to see red, shiny patches appearing on the backs of his hands, as though the outer layers were being eaten away.

“Not too long, now,” Zetsu said. “First it must break down into tiny, tiny pieces.”

They were dissolving him. Like a fly caught in a venus fly trap.

“We will wait. Oh, yes. We will wait.”

The crow led Sakura to a dilapidated cottage, and, inside it, a trap door. She pecked and pecked, and eventually Sakura figured out the bird was speaking to her in code.

F-i-r-e-f-i-r-e-f-i-r-e

“Fire chakra?”

Bob, bob. The crow danced and hopped across the floor.

Doable. Sakura placed her hands on the floor and released the tiniest amount of chakra she could manage. The trap door opened on silent hinges. Sakura dropped down into the darkness: a tunnel, she realized when she felt the walls around her. It was all packed earth, with occasional stones and thick roots jutting out: a mostly natural structure, with some human help here and there to keep the tunnel's dimensions stay even. She closed the door and retreated to a corner, then closed her eyes as they adjusted to the gloom. As she closed her eyes, she plotted. Itachi was somewhere in here, Sakura assumed, and if the crow had gone to them for help, that meant the situation was dire enough to attract attention. Itachi himself probably hadn't given the order, but whatever had happened was bad enough for his crow to betray his trust.

Or, maybe this was all a ploy to get her out of the village so Itachi could kill her somewhere more private and leave her body to rot while he did...whatever it was Itachi planned to do. Regardless, here Sakura was, and whatever was waiting for her at the end of this tunnel, she would face it head-on. Sakura extracted a small spyglass from her pouch. Crouched, she aimed the spyglass towards the end of the tunnel, searching for any sign of light.

She found it. There was a glow, likely from an emergency glow stick, filling a cavernous room beyond the tunnel. Her eyes couldn't make out any fine details, but she could see a domed structure, a figure inside the structure, and one or two other figures standing in front of it.

Zetsu. White ones. Sakura flattened herself to the ground, for all the good it wouldn't do to save her ass. She knew it had to be Itachi trapped in that structure. It had to be. And if Zetsu had been strong enough, quick enough, *smart* enough to get Itachi in there, then she was fucked. Maybe. Or maybe not, if she planned carefully. Raw strength alone did not win battles. Creativity might trump power. If she was careful, there was a small chance she could win this thing, or at least cause enough of a distraction for Itachi to free himself and

take Zetsu out. Whatever she did would have to be quick, decisive, and violent.

Step One: compromise the Zetsu. Components: earth jutsu, wire, senbon, kunai. Sakura held her breath, counted to ten. Let it out. And then she moved, creeping like a worm to the last bit of tunnel before the space opened up into the cavernous room. Like the tunnel, the room appeared mostly natural, though the stones and roots poking through the dirt walls were even larger. A perfect storm for some earth jutsu. Using as little chakra as she possibly could, Sakura made the signs and placed her hands upon the earth. It was an unassuming technique, but useful: it destabilized the earth by nudging little bits of it apart; its more powerful counterparts could create quicksand, mudslides, encase opponents in blocks of dirt as compact as steel. This version was not designed to kill or maim, but to unmoor.

Something—Sakura wasn't sure what—prevented her from destabilizing the ground beneath the structure trapping Itachi. At this range, she got a better look at it: vines, thorns, sickly green chakra. Zetsu's handiwork. Very well; Itachi would have to get out another way. It was too risky to push for more.

Then, Sakura readied the next stage of her attack. She took out two senbon and two kunai, affixing wires to each. The kunai went in her left hand. The senbon went in her right. With a soundless grunt, Sakura lifted herself from the earth into a runner's starting position, and then charged ahead. Both Itachi and the two Zetsu snapped their heads in her direction. Sakura threw the kunai, guiding them with the wires until they lined up with each Zetsu's right shoulder. They leaned to the left, into the path of the two senbon, which pierced the flesh of their necks down to the circular pommels.

Now. *Now*. Sakura focused, and sent a pulse of yin chakra shooting down the wire. The chakra connected with the senbon, and from there traveled into the bodies of the white Zetsu. They dropped boneless to the floor, and lay there, limp: the chakra had surged across whatever passed for a brain stem in these things, leaving their bodies useless from the neck down. For now. Normally, such an attack would've

killed them both—turned them into paste. But to Sakura in her current form, this was a victory.

She darted forward, pulled out the sword, and brought it down on one Zetsu's neck with all of her strength. It took her three strikes to cut to the center, and so too with the second Zetsu she stabbed, bringing the sword point-down into an eerie, golden-yellow eye. All movement in their bodies ceased. Done. For now. But as Sakura knelt and caught her breath, she felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand at attention. A chill ran down her spine. She began to pant. Before her mind had even registered the danger, her body knew and tried to warn her. Where—?

“Sakura,” Itachi barked, his voice strangely muffled through the viney mesh. “Behind you.”

“Oh,” a silken voice murmured in the darkness. “It has come to save this one.”

No. *No*. This stupid body of hers had barely any strength to begin with; the charge and those two simple techniques had all but drained her. There were *two*, there had only been two. And Itachi was supposed to have found a way out by now—

A white arm, bulging with unearthly muscle, jabbed at her, the hand flat, fingers stiff and pointing out. Sakura dodged the first strike, but the second hit her straight in the chest. She felt a rib crack, and gasped.

“Oh, does this one belong to it? Has it come to save its lover?”

Two white hands grabbed her at the waist, picked her up with no signs of effort, and threw her into a wall of thick stone. Another rib

cracked. Sakura spat out a mouthful of blood; she'd bit her tongue. She could feel blood leaking out of wounds on her back, and bruises already starting to form. The dome now stood between her and Zetsu; Itachi was close enough for Sakura to see him more clearly, and the look on his face did her no comfort. She wouldn't call it panicked—people like Itachi did not panic, that was for peasants like her—but it was a damn near thing. There were red patches all over his skin, like acid burns.

The white hand returned, a slap catching the side of her face and twisting her neck to the side. Broken cheekbone.

“It isn't strong enough to look away,” Zetsu crooned. “Why has it come here?”

“I have nothing to say to you, you monster.” Sakura coughed. Blood—and a small chunk of *something*—splattered on the stone floors. “Except: die.”

The white Zetsu laughed. Sakura had never heard a creepier sound in her life, and she'd been privy to Naruto's shower singing.

That's right, she told herself. Keep joking, keep brushing it off. Chin up. He hasn't killed us yet. *You can do this.*

“It will make a good appetizer, at least. Bony little thing that it is.” He picked her up by the hair—always the fucking hair—and threw her again. This time, her back caught against a thick, wooden bookshelf. Old, crumbling scrolls topped down all around her. Sprained wrist. Maybe broken. But no pain, not yet. Adrenaline kept her up; only when she was safe would the pain come.

“Useless.” The sound did not come from the Zetsu before her, but from

the head she'd cut off from one of the first two. "It shouldn't fight so hard. Why deny the inevitable?"

"I'm *not*—"

Weak. Weak. Weak. Weak little girl, stupid little girl, having crushes instead of goals, dreams of kisses instead of triumph. What good was she to the world like this? But then, perhaps she'd been sent here to die. Perhaps those happy futures that the Sage had glimpsed *did* have her in them...dead, martyred, an inspiration to stronger players on this farce of a stage. She'd clearly been loved here. That love might topple giants.

Sakura could not stop the tears, but she knew they were not from fear or sadness. She raged, and burned inside, for all the things she could not control, and for all the fights that she could not—would not—win. This one, and so many others. This *stupid*, useless body, and her selfish vanity, had brought her to this final act of helpless fury.

No. *No*. She would not die without a fight. Even if it only served to delay her death by seconds, she would fight, though she would not win. Zetsu grabbed her again. Threw her. And a blinding hatred fueled her; the sword, still clutched tight in one fist, came down behind her head in an arc, and cut off her hair at the atlas of her spine. She rolled the landing poorly, and came down hard on one knee. Scrambling to a kneeling position, she saw Zetsu approach, standing at the edge of a trail of pink hair.

He laughed again. Stepped forward, onto the pile of locks. Sakura joined her hands in a single seal, and with everything she had left, she sent yin chakra crackling through the hair. The chakra pulse followed the hair's path from strand to strand, entering the white Zetsu's body through one foot and exploding internally into fractals. It was not enough to kill him. But it did make him stumble, and that was enough.

Sakura ran forward, sword pointed out, and pierced the Zetsu through the chest. There was no heart to rend, not truly, but she pinned the creature all the same. Again, it laughed at her, though its arms still hung at its sides.

“Little bee, little bee, little blossom,” it taunted her. *It*, not he. “I am much stronger than it. It knows. It will die once I can move again.”

Fuck. *Fuck*. It was right, and it hurt. Sakura burned, burned with frustration and fear and rage. The tears fell from her eyes. And a curious feeling, an energy hot yet comforting, like a fire on a winter’s night, began growing at the center of her chest. It whispered to her. Begged to be used.

“It cannot kill a weed. Not this one.”

Sakura grabbed onto that strange energy in her chest. Held on tight. It burst, filling her body with light. The smell of rain in a forest, wind in a meadow, dry grass on a hot summer's day filled the cavern.

“Fucking *watch* me, asshole,” Sakura sobbed. The energy poured out of her body, traveling up the sword and into the white Zetsu’s body. It blinked, stiffened, and then its eyes widened in horror.

“No, *no*, you *can’t*—” Its body exploded into paste. The other two Zetsu faded from white to brown, and then crumbled into dust. Sakura collapsed, falling straight down in a heap. The pain, held at bay by her fear, collided into her body like a herd of angry buffalo. Sakura began crying—not crying, wailing—sobbing and choking on her own spit as she tried to take in air. She fell forward, her hands landing on her own cut hair, and she grabbed fistfuls of it, holding it up like a sacrifice to an unseen god.

Memories cut into her like knives, and all of the things Sakura had been pressing down in her relentless fury burst the banks of her mind. They were all dead, all of the people she'd ever known, and she had nothing of them, nothing at all but these memories that would soon fade. The only thing she would remember in the end was their faces, the false ones worn by the shadows walking the earth beyond this dilapidated house. Those people, who were not her people, *wore* her people's faces like masks.

Sakura owed her life to her people. They'd protected her when she couldn't protect them, and then she'd gotten stronger and protected them. Naruto, and Sasuke, and Kaka-sensei, and her parents, and Lady Tsunade...and Ino, Ino, Ino. Ino the perfect friend, the girl whose lovely blonde hair had fallen upon a bloody arena a thousand lifetimes ago, cut off in an act of cunning Sakura hadn't noticed until too late. Her Ino was gone with the rest of them, and all Sakura had left of her was memories and hair—her hair, not Ino's hair. Of the rest, Sakura possessed memories alone. And soon those, too, would blow away in the wind.

Tears joined her blood on the stone. She looked to her right and made eye contact with Itachi, who quickly looked away. A sight like that might have amused her once, but all it did now was provoke a dull humiliation. Of all the people she could've chosen to have a breakdown in front of, it was this asshole. Itachi Uchiha: murderer, unwilling partner, betrayer, witness to her pointless existence.

But then, he surprised her. His eyes—black, not red—found hers, and he walked to the edge of his cage and squatted down. If she reached out a hand, she might have touched him if it weren't for the vines still separating them, most likely powered by a hidden seal. Itachi spoke. He comforted her, of all things.

"It's all right," he said. The words stumbled out of his mouth on clumsy legs. "You killed him. He's gone."

“I’m fucking *useless*,” Sakura cried. Then, because it was not enough for Itachi to have seen her bloodied and crying, she threw up. Definitely a concussion in there somewhere.

But Itachi ignored the vomit, and everything else. “You killed him,” he said. “I couldn’t.”

Sakura wiped off her mouth. “That doesn’t mean shit. He probably just got the jump on you. Maybe this Zetsu is more powerful. If you couldn’t get him with your eyes, then he has to be different. You have that—that black fire shit.”

“Ah.” Itachi looked amused, of all things. But not by her. He brought his face closer, and Sakura watched blood red bleed across soft black. Two Sharingan. And six—no, not six. Three dots. Two in one, and one in the other. An incomplete Sharingan. Like Sasuke’s, when he’d first —

“Oh,” Sakura said. “Oh, fuck. Oh, *fuck*, fuck.”

“Yes,” Itachi concurred.

“Oh, my god, we are *fucked*, aren’t we?”

The ghost of a smirk pulled at Itachi’s mouth. “That does appear to be the case.”

“Oh, my god.” Sakura grabbed her head with both hands. “I can’t—I mean, I knew *I* wouldn’t be able to fight him like this, but I always

figured that if it came down to it, you—”

He'd been her trump card. She hadn't thought of him that way on *purpose*, not explicitly, but Sakura would be lying to herself if she said Itachi played no role in her plan to save the world. If he didn't have his stupid magic eyes, then what the hell were they supposed to do?

“Perhaps it doesn't matter,” Itachi said. “But I want to apologize for the way I spoke to you earlier. It was condescending, and wrong of me.”

Sakura sniffed. “Well, you were right.”

Itachi shrugged. “You were the one who killed these three. Not me. You took a body, genin level at best, and defeated three agents of Black Zetsu. What you did was no small feat.”

“I could've taken out a hundred in two seconds if I had my seal.”

“And if you had wings, you could've flown away.”

“You would've figured something out eventually.”

“Likely. But my apology is legitimate.”

Sakura studied his face. He meant it. Itachi really *meant* it. This wasn't some ploy to get to her. Even if he'd been caught by Zetsu, he was still stronger than her. He didn't need her. There was no doubt in her mind that, given enough time, he'd have been able to take the white Zetsu

out. But he'd apologized all the same. What a strange world this was.

Because she was watching him, Sakura caught the moment Itachi winced, and remembered that he was still trapped in a vine-cage operated by a seal that was eating away at his skin. Right.

Though her body punished her for it, Sakura crawled to the dome and studied it, finding the tiny lines of text criss-crossing the structure.

"I know this writing," Sakura said. "I can't read it, but—Kaguya and Zetsu used seals with this writing."

"Then it's powerful, and ancient," Itachi said. "The best path forward would be to alert the Fourth, or his wife. Both of them are sealing masters. My Sharingan isn't fine enough to find weaknesses in it from appearance alone."

"I'd have to leave you alone." Sakura held out her hands, stopping them centimeters from the eerie, green glow. There was something odd about the energy emanating from this seal. She could feel it, and she was no sensor. "I can't send a shadow clone that far."

"I'll be fine. Is Echo outside?"

"Who?" Itachi's voice faded away, as did the sound of wind in the tunnel, and the smell of dust and blood. The seal *sang*, its energy calling to her like a siren.

"Don't—" Itachi's voice cut through the darkness. But it was too late. Sakura pressed her hands flat against the chakra barrier. She gasped. The hot energy in her chest expanded, filled her lungs, and on the

exhale flowed out of her body and into the vines. Flowers began to sprout everywhere, drawing moisture out of the vines until they shriveled. Woody twigs grew from the base of the flowers, surrounding the softer, green vines, squeezing the life out of them. And with a sound like a death rattle, the seal shattered, and the cage with it. A cascade of vegetation rained down on top of them, the clatter of the twigs reverberating throughout the cave.

Itachi stared at Sakura's hands. Sakura stared at Sakura's hands. They stood so close together that, if he tipped his weight forward, Itachi's forehead would connect with hers in less than an inch. He reached for words, but none came. He felt the shock, yes, but also a strange humility, as though he'd just born witness to something sacred.

Sakura broke through the silence first. "I can't—" She, too, struggled for words. "Did that really just happen? Did I do that? And Zetsu, when I made him blow up...it wasn't—did *you* do something to me?"

"No," Itachi said.

"Is this what he meant by—?" Sakura laughed, though it came out more like a sob. "Bet you wish you'd have taken me with you now."

That was combat medics for you. Always ready with a laugh at the darkest times. Itachi took the diss gracefully—he'd never been particularly bothered by taunts, but this felt almost like a gentle tease. She was *teasing* him. What odd people this world had turned them into, and they'd lived in it less than a week. For want of a response, Itachi knelt down and picked up the tanto. He wiped off the grimy, white sludge on a section of ruined parchment, sheathed it, and handed it to Sakura.

“Your new talents notwithstanding,” he said. “My earlier statements stand. Your power was not the cause of my condescension. My behavior towards you was a choice that I made, and it was a poor one.”

Of course he had questions. Of course he wanted to investigate further, to make her sprout flowers again, to prove that what she'd just done was—Itachi couldn't even *think* the word. It was so unthinkable that she'd manifested the First's powers out of nowhere. Had she always had the ability, and simply lacked the proper trigger? Or had the Sage bestowed the gift upon her directly? So many questions. But there would be time to satisfy them later; for now, the important thing was getting out of this cavern and back inside Konoha's walls—Sakura especially: her wounds were severe, despite her relatively good humor.

“I...” Sakura cleared her throat. “Thank you.”

Well, look at that. Their relationship had spontaneously developed inclusion of pleasantries.

“I'm not saying these things to placate you. It's the truth.”

Sakura looked Itachi up and down, flushed, and turned away. When she began to shake, Itachi braced himself for more crying. But when Sakura lifted a hand to her mouth, Itachi realized she was laughing. She was laughing...at him?

“I'm sorry.” Her breath hitched, and another couple sobs escaped. “I'm not trying to be mean, but—you just—you're *you*, and you're saying all these things, and you sound like a *little kid*.”

Itachi felt his face heat up, and was thankful for the darkness. “I *am* a

little kid,” he shot back, feeling suddenly petulant. “And so are you.”

Sakura swayed in place, kept upright by a gentle knee to her upper back. “I’m...we should go.” Itachi heard the slur in her voice—a concussion, most likely. “I think...” Sakura held out her hands and stared at them some more. “When I did the...the thing, a lot of my cuts and things healed. But I’ve got some cracked ribs, and a concussion still, and my wrist...yeah, we should go. I’m smelling some colors right now. I’m going to throw up again. Sorry.”

She did.

“We need to leave,” Itachi agreed. The burning in his skin gnawed at him, but it was a manageable pain compared to what Sakura was likely going through. He scanned the cave. The writings he’d come for were almost certainly plundered by Zetsu’s own hands, but it would still be worth coming back another time to investigate what remained. The Uchiha would clear the place—at the very least, they’d want the bones so they could be properly burned—and, should it be possible to turn the house into a safe haven, it could serve as a meeting place for the two of them.

The two of them. Itachi considered Sakura, swaying and mumbling as she was, and realized that in the past few minutes, he’d already begun thinking of her as a partner. They weren’t friends, or even particularly friendly with one another, but there was something between them now, something that the battle had drawn out. Camaraderie, maybe. It was a start.

“I have your journal on me,” Itachi said. He reached down and picked Sakura up as gently as he could. She hissed in pain, but she was disciplined enough not to struggle. “Let’s go. I’m sure reinforcements aren’t far from here. We’ll meet them on the way back to the village.”

“Tally ho,” Sakura crowed. “Onwards, captain! Go forth! Adventure. I *love* adventures, man.”

Definitely a concussion.

Chapter End Notes

Everyone ships Itachi and Sakura even fucking Zetsu.

**UCHIHA CLAN AFTER SECURING
BETROTHAL BETWEEN ITACHI AND HARUNO SAKURA**

**SHE'S THE GRANDDAUGHTER OF A
WEALTHY, POLITICALLY INFLUENTIAL NOBLEWOMAN**

**HER FAMILY CONNECTIONS WILL GIVE
THE CLAN ACCESS TO LUCRATIVE TRADE ROUTES**

MOKUTON

imgflip.com

1. I hired you as an interior designer for the creepy Uchiha bone

pit. From what historical period and geographic location will you derive your inspiration?

2. Is Echo the real MVP of this story?

3. Is Itachi valid? You all were so mean to him in the comments last chapter iasldkf;asfdiuhas give the man a BREAK he is BROKEN. Meanwhile, I will continue feeding him through the meat grinder.

4. Is killing someone while crying girlboss behavior?

5. Are you going to read my angsty Top Gun fanfiction I'm writing right now? Y—you should. Tiny fandom good fandom. @Horizon_moon_eclipse you're never gonna believe this I'm making the men cry again

I feast upon your comments. They make me want to write more and faster. I wrote this entire chapter in one day. Imagine.

Hid myself in the briar-patch bush

Chapter Summary

In this chapter Weasel has a good old sit-down with Boruto's grandfather off screen, while Julius Caesar ponders setting people on fire a little bit to cure illnesses somehow

Chapter Notes

Sasuke: being named after a famous ninja

Itachi: being named after an animal

Mikoto: These r my sons Weasel and Julius Caesar

#naruto #naruto shippuden #shippuden #itachi uchiha #sasuke
#uchiha

2,665 notes May 20th, 2019



[source](#)

this is my favorite Nardo post on tungle dot com. I do not know who this person is but their mind is incredible

Please look up some videos/audios with actual 13 year old actors because it is SO much funnier to read this story with that in mind vs hearing adult voice actors pitch their voices down. Imagine 7th graders holding one another in disdain. Not hatred. Disdain. Like dueling baronesses having tea.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Team Kakashi stumbled into them halfway, Kakashi leading with Sasuke and Naruto trailing close behind. He gave them both a look as though a lecture were imminent, but upon seeing the state Sakura was in, decided it better to get her back to Konoha as quickly as possible. They met up with the specialist team en route, and the whole group sped off through the trees.

Sasuke maneuvered sideways, branch by branch, until he kept pace with Itachi. His face was deathly pale, and there was a red puffiness to his eyes that Itachi dreaded to see. Even in this world, it seemed, he would bear the terrible honor of driving his brother to tears.

“Are you okay?” Sasuke’s voice, saturated in pain and worry, cut Itachi to the bone.

“They’re superficial,” Itachi said of his wounds. “I’ll be just fine.”

“Is she...?”

“Her injuries are serious, but she won’t die.”

“Good.” Sasuke sniffed. “Good.”

They reached the main gate without incident, save for the continued deterioration of Sakura’s good sense; she kept badgering Kakashi about the ending to one of the Toad Sage’s books, and to Naruto she gave a speech about the dangers of drinking expired milk. But her condition was stable, concussion (and consequent vomiting) notwithstanding. Rather than provoke concern (or worse—Questions), her nonsensical comments thankfully calmed her two teammates.

At the checkpoint, Sakura made one final announcement to the group that gave Itachi pause.

“Hey, I can—you guys, I can make plants. I can. *Make. PLANTS.* Little plants. Sticks. Flowers. Gonna put the Yamanakas out of business. Plant monopoly. I don’t make weird plants like *him*. It. Not him. It.”

“Yes, Sakura,” Kakashi said absentmindedly. He signed off on the paperwork handed over by the guard. “We all like plants. Plants are good.”

There had been many moments in Itachi’s life wherein he stood at a crossroads, poised to guide the hand of fate. Many of them had been brutal: the choice to obey his father and enlist with the ANBU, the choice to kill his family, the choice to spare Sasuke, the choice to serve Obito—to him, Madara. Now, here was another choice. Would he reveal Sakura’s abilities now, and send her careening headlong into some new destiny? Or would he stay silent, hope her exhaustion suppressed the ability for a repeat performance, and convince her to keep the mokuton secret for as long as possible?

Both options were tantalizing. Still, in the end, there was only one sensible choice.

“Kakashi-san.”

Pen paused on paper. Could Kakashi hear the gravity weighing down Itachi’s words? Did he know that Itachi was about to change his fate—the fate of the entire village, and the world beyond its borders—forever? But there was no turning back now. Itachi would throw down this gauntlet before the feet of the unfeeling universe, before the feet of the Sage who’d condemned him to this punishment, and come what may, he would bear the consequences.

“There’s something you need to know.”

Minato waited for them at the doors to the hospital wearing a grim

expression. Yamato—or did he go by Tenzo, here?— stood behind him, as did a bevy of hospital staff. A doctor, sporting an embroidered uchiwa underneath a pin signifying her status as attending physician, instructed Itachi to hand Sakura over to two residents. They whisked Sakura away through the double doors. Yamato and Kakashi followed after a nod from Minato.

Naruto and Sasuke huddled together like birds in the rain on the hospital steps, waiting to be told what to do.

“Can we go, too?” Sasuke’s hands fidgeted restlessly at his sides.

“Not right now,” Minato said.

“Dad—”

“Naruto,” Minato pressed his lips into a thin line. “Sakura is getting the best care that we can offer. She’ll be fine.”

“But can we just—”

“When she’s stable, you will be allowed to visit her. But while she is being treated, we will all have to wait.”

“Oh.” Naruto slumped a little. “It’s because of patient congeniality.”

“Patient *confidentiality*, dingus.” Sasuke relaxed his hands. He was still jittery, but clearly calmed by Minato’s confidence. A good leader kept a straight face, even at the darkest of times. What had Minato

accomplished these past thirteen years as hokage? Itachi had been so focused on finding information regarding the Akatsuki that he hadn't given Minato much thought.

All of that could wait. Minato turned his piercing stare onto Itachi, who waited for whatever verdict would come.

"Itachi," he said. "I'll be in to speak with you as soon as you're cleared. Don't leave the hospital until I've given you permission to do so."

So he would be interrogated, then. Prudent. Sakura would be questioned as well, separately. One question above all would be on Minato's mind: why had Itachi left the village in the first place? The fact he'd been accosted was secondary; technically, that could've happened anywhere, at any time. But to leave the village might very well be branded as defection, or worse. Hasty for answers and overconfident in his own strength, Itachi hadn't given a single thought as to how he might account for his behavior.

Sakura probably had. Though she was not physically strong, she was intelligent, and canny. This situation, as poorly as it'd ended for her body, represented Sakura's best chance to clip Itachi's wings without putting herself in danger of retaliation. While Itachi was scion of a major clan, Sakura's lineage now held nearly as much prestige and far more money. Sakura could blame her decision to leave on young love. She could accuse Itachi of anything. He wouldn't be confined on her word alone, of course, but he could be investigated, which would cost him time and freedom.

Itachi entered the hospital with the remaining resident and two nurses, ready to accept the hokage's judgment. If this was where he and Sakura parted, so be it. In his other life, he'd never been in control of his destiny. Why would this life be any different?

“We go there to kiss,” Sakura said. “We were kissing.”

All activity in the exam room screeched to a halt. The resident, still treating Sakura’s concussion, cleared his throat. Kakashi-sensei stared at her in disbelief. The Uchiha doctor clapped a hand over her mouth, but couldn’t stop a snort from escaping. Yamato’s eyes went blank for a moment, but then he shrugged. Naruto and Sasuke, who were *not* to leave the waiting area but had anyway, gaped at her from the hallway. Sakura made no attempt to hide her mortified blush. It helped sell the story, after all.

Kakashi closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. “So you left the village without permission.”

“Yes. That did—yes.”

“And you entered an abandoned building, not knowing if or when it had been cleared.”

“Mmm, yeah. Yeah, I did do that.”

“And you went through an *unmarked trap door* ...”

“Yeah.”

“...because a *bird* you *do not know* told you to...”

“Yup. And then the tunnel, and the weird plant guy, and the trap.”

“For kissing.”

“Uh huh. We, uh, we just use the house for kissing. We didn’t know about the bones downstairs until Itachi got...in trouble down there.”

“Sakura.”

“What.”

“*Why.*”

“It’s our kissing spot.” Sakura had faced many hardships in her life, some of them insurmountable. But never before had she experienced an urge to dig her own grave, lie down inside of it, and wait for the sweet embrace of death. Never before this very moment.

The doctor nudged Kakashi-sensei aside. “Move it. Sakura, give me a deep breath. Good, good. Hatake, is it really that surprising? She’s had a crush on him for years.”

Of *course* she had. Next time Sakura died, she’d make sure to bring a weapon into the afterlife so she could turn the Sage into a Six Paths Kebab.

“Are you *certain* this isn’t the concussion talking.”

“I’m certain. That was just a little bonk. I’ve seen a lot worse. I’m more worried about these lacerations. Mori, disinfect, please.”

“Ma’am.”

The doctor walked to a table against the wall and made a few notes on Sakura’s chart. Kakashi pursued, voicing similar concerns the doctor summarily ignored. Sasuke and Naruto took advantage of the distraction and crept across the room, seen only by people who didn’t care enough to stop them. A few reassurances, accompanied by a smile, were enough to set their minds at ease. Naruto climbed into the bed and made himself comfortable. Sasuke peeked over Mori’s shoulder, observing the disinfection with great interest.

“Could I use a fire jutsu to disinfect wounds?” Sasuke leaned in for a closer look at the gash. Mori put a finger on his forehead and pushed him away.

“Don’t be silly. You’ll just cook people.”

“Right, but in theory, do you think medicinal fire jutsu *could* be used to disinfect wounds?”

“I think it could be used to wind up in jail.”

Minato Namikaze stepped into the room. “Sakura,” he said. “I hear you’re doing better.”

“I am.”

He pulled up a stool next to the bed, sat down, and handed over a piece of paper. Sakura held it up. Chakra paper: the strange, mottled texture and slight sheen couldn't have been mistaken for anything else. Minato jerked his head at Yamato, who joined him at the side of the bed.

“Your sensei and fiancé have told me something very interesting, Sakura. He thinks, based on the things he saw you do in the cavern, that you’ve developed the mokuton.”

Sakura bit the inside of her cheek. So Itachi had told them, then. But despite her irritation and immediate desire for petty vengeance, Sakura knew damn well things would’ve ended badly for both of them had he kept her abilities secret. Zetsu had witnessed the birth of the mokuton in person, and from what Sakura remembered, all of them were connected somehow—or maybe just the white ones? At this point, the difference didn’t change much. It was only a matter of time before she became a target.

Naruto gasped. “*What?*”

Minato closed his eyes. “Naruto, I am closing my eyes. When I open my eyes, I will not see you in this room. That is because you are currently in the *waiting* area, which is the place I instructed both of you to *wait in*.”

Naruto and Sasuke scampered off. Minato opened his eyes.

“Now,” Minato said. “Can you describe to me in your own words what happened when you killed that man?”

Sakura described the scene as best she could. The concussion made her memories from the house a little fluffy around the edges, but she

remembered the heat, and the overwhelming rush of life in her veins. And the flowers, and the vines...and, for a split second, a feeling of utter peace that had been struck down by pain.

Minato furrowed his brow. "I see. Yamato, your thoughts?"

"Sir, I'm not aware of any other techniques capable of spontaneously generating plant life. Water and earth separately, yes. And there are techniques that enable speeding the growth of plant life. But nothing else can create plants from raw material."

"And is it normal for it to develop this late?"

"That I don't know, sir."

Minato nodded. "Sakura," he said. "I want you to hold onto that paper and send some chakra through it." He turned to Yamato. "Will that be enough, or should she try using the mokuton intentionally?"

Yamato shook his head. "Chakra alone should be enough. With this type of paper, element-based bloodline abilities trump nature affinity."

"Understood. Go ahead, Sakura."

Everyone in the room turned their gaze upon Sakura's hand, and the paper she grasped lightly between thumb and forefinger. Minato watched. Kakashi-sensei watched. Yamato watched. The doctor watched. Naruto, who despite previous threats had returned to the doorway to ogle, watched. The whole world watched. Was that damned Sage somewhere out there watching her, too?

Sakura swallowed hard. She closed her eyes, concentrated, and sent a pulse of chakra up her arm, out through the fingertips, and into the paper. The energy filled the paper with life. It stiffened, but then became pliant in her fingers. Sakura opened her eyes. Between her fingers, what had once been paper was now a fan-shaped leaf. Verdant, green, brimming with life, it sang with a vitality that echoed in her bones. Then it turned brown, desiccated, and crumbled into fragments. Sakura fell back against the pillows, overcome with a sudden and acute fatigue. Mori grabbed her hand and held it tight.

A hush, like pious reverence, settled over the room. Mouths fell open. Eyes widened. The doctor clutched Sakura's file to her chest. Kakashi-sensei appeared as though his brain had emptied of all thought. Sasuke had rejoined Naruto at the door; both boys gesticulated wildly at one another, whisper-yelling in disbelief.

Minato broke the silence. "Well, shit," he said. "I didn't see that coming."

Itachi walked her home, which everyone thought was extremely cute. The hospital had alerted both their parents of the incident, but only after Minato gave the all-clear. It made sense. The equivalent of a geopolitical bomb had just been dropped into Minato's lap; consequently, Sakura's identity, her abilities, and her very existence required delicate handling. Word would get out, and that meant Attention ranging from nosy to murderous would soon point in Konoha's direction.

It took whole *teams* of people to help manage interference and protection of the village's other bloodline abilities. That a mokuton user had popped up after generations of genetic radio silence would pique the interest of every nation on the continent. People would hunt Sakura. They would attempt to entice her into defection. When she

was older, they might seduce her by wearing the faces of civilians interested in casual sex. There could be kidnappings. Sakura imagined several in graphic detail. These were just normal thoughts. Just a whole bunch of non-terrifying scenarios for a 13-year-old girl to ponder on her way home with her—Sakura shuddered—boyfriend-fiance. God, that kissing comment was going to come back to bite her in the ass.

Immediately.

“You told them we go to that house for kissing,” Itachi said.

It was not a question, but a statement. Sakura pulled Naruto’s jacket tighter around her body and scrunched up her shoulders. The night was a bit chilly, and Naruto’s Dramatic Hero Mode had activated upon the first sighting of Sakura’s goosebumps. After that, he and Sasuke had run off—Naruto back home and Sasuke to report to Fugaku and Mikoto in person—leaving Sakura and Itachi...and her parents walking fifty paces behind them. Chaperones. Chaperones on the cute little date she and Itachi were on. Everyone at the hospital had barely refrained from squealing. Did *any* of these adults have better things to do? She and Itachi were *children*, for god’s sake.

What a time to be alive.

“I did,” Sakura said. “It needed to be believable, but not raise the wrong sorts of alarms.”

Itachi raised an eyebrow. “You don’t think sneaking outside the village to kiss is cause for alarm? For a child, it might sound reasonable. Adults might not be so lenient. Your parents strike me as the indulgent sort, but you might have put yourself on a shorter leash.”

"I know that," Sakura snapped. Little know-it-all Uchiha geniuses ought to be seen and not heard. "Look, I've been eavesdropping the past couple days and, from everything I've gathered, people think we're some sort of adorable power couple. Apparently I have a huge crush on you and have *had* a huge crush on you for some time. No idea what your deal is, so you can figure that out yourself."

"Ah."

"So yeah, kissing made sense."

"But the Fourth did ask you about...our assailant, correct?"

Sakura gave Itachi a side-eye. His gaze pointed towards the path ahead, his posture resolute. His body language exuded serene apathy, which juxtaposed harshly with the anxiety crushing her chest so hard her shoulders ached. Even now, with his feathers trimmed, his body covered in thin bandages everywhere Zetsu's acid had burned him, he was still an ice-cold bastard.

"Of course he did."

"And you said...?"

"I kept calling him a plant guy and described his features: white, green hair, appendages reminiscent of carnivorous flora. I told them what he said, and how he'd spoken."

"You referred to him as 'it' earlier, didn't you?"

Sakura hunched her shoulders even more. “Does it matter?”

“You kept insisting Zetsu is ‘it’ and not ‘him’ on the way back. Is that all there really is to it, or is something else bothering you?”

“It makes me feel better, I guess. He’s—it’s, whatever. Not a person.”

“I’ve traveled many places, and met individuals who referred to themselves as ‘it.’ People. Are you distancing yourself from him because you fear him? Will that make it easier for you to destroy him? Does it make you feel more like a person when you strip others of their personhood?”

Sakura froze. Lucky for both of them, the place she’d stopped just so happened to be the gates of her family estate. Otherwise, the new gossip around town would feature the headline, *Breaking News! Haruno Heiress Curb Stomps Little Fucker Who Won’t Shut His Stupid Mouth.*

“Itachi,” Sakura said. Her eyelids fluttered of their own accord; she could feel the fatigue from earlier preparing to kick her in the ass. One tiny leaf and she’d felt like she’d lapped the village wall. “I don’t want to talk about this with you. I think we both figured out today that we have to work together. This whole—running off on our own isn’t going to solve our problem—the *world’s* problem. We have to work together, and that means being professional. No fighting, no trying to piss each other off.”

She looked at the ground instead of Itachi’s face, unwilling to put herself through another of his emotionless stares. It struck her as bizarre that she felt even remotely comfortable taking her eyes off of his body like this, but here she was. Here they were.

A journal— *her* journal—appeared before her, clutched in Itachi's hand. He tilted the cover at her, offering. She took it, ran her thumb across the cover. She glanced up. Itachi was indeed staring right into her face, but he wasn't emotionless. There was something there... something she couldn't identify, not at this stage in their relationship. But it was present, and intense.

"Thank you," she said after an awkward pause. Her parents slipped past them and made their way up the path to the house. An even more awkward pause followed.

"I agree," Itachi said. "Working together is the best path forward. Neither of us are capable of matching Zetsu at this point, or, to be frank, the average high ranking jounin. Pooling our resources is the smarter strategy."

Sakura nodded. The wind blew her ragged hair in her face, and she pulled the strands behind one ear. She'd need to get it cut tomorrow before people had a chance to gawk at it.

"I don't know why the Sage stuck us together," Sakura said. "But I believe that we're both here for a reason. There's something about each of us that gives the world a happier future. We may not trust one another right now, but we need to learn to work together. That means building trust. Maybe we can train together. I don't know. We can talk later. I'll be busy with Yamato for a few days. The Hokage is making him my special instructor from now on. I'll go on missions with Team 7, but Yamato's training takes priority."

"I'm not surprised. I'll be seeking out training, as well. My Sharingan development is my highest priority." Itachi gave her a once over, and then he looked off in the distance. Another breeze blew in, carrying loose leaves and the smell of wood fires along with it. Itachi pulled his hair out of his face, mirroring her own gesture from before. The

strangest thing about Itachi, Sakura thought, was all the little normal things he did. People things. He'd never been a person to her before. Just a dangerous obstacle to overcome. But he'd become something else to her entirely, in this place. She wasn't sure what. He was just... different.

Itachi stepped forward. It was so sudden, and so like the preamble to a kiss, that Sakura nearly scrambled backwards to get away. But he didn't lean forward, or raise his hand against her. That unreadable, intense look was back, and Sakura had no idea how to respond to its presence.

"Sakura," Itachi said. "You said we ought to build trust with one another. If it satisfies you, I'll answer your question."

"My—?"

"The one you asked me back then. In the forest. When I was with Nagato."

"Why did you do it?"

The question. *The* question. All that time wondering, and he was just going to *tell* her?

"Bastard. Just say you did it because you wanted to know how it felt."

"Sakura, about that night..."

“Thank you. For looking after my brother.”

Fury, Sakura’s constant companion, fled from her body with a violence that left her trembling. A powerful, unfathomable fear took hold of her in its wake.

“No.” She interrupted Itachi halfway through his next word. “No. I—uh, it’s not—”

Not what she wanted? Not what she needed? Not believable? Not the right time? Itachi blinked. Surprise flitted across his face, quick as a wink. And just as quickly, it was gone again. The mask slammed back into place.

Sakura’s face burned. “I just...” Words, words, words. “It shouldn’t matter,” she bit out. “It shouldn’t...you don’t need to tell me that for me to work with you. It’s not...it doesn’t matter. We can’t change anything anyway, so what does it...it doesn’t matter,” she finished on a mumble.

The clouds overhead parted from the moon, leaving just enough of a space for light to filter through, dipping the alley in silvery-white.

“Then will you answer my question?” Itachi’s voice was flat, monotone, and Sakura realized the only reason she’d noticed was because he *hadn’t* been speaking that way to her.

“Yes.”

“Why did you accept the betrothal?”

Why, indeed. But for this question, Sakura had a definite answer.

“My grandmother has wealth, resources, and connections. It’ll take us far in terms of gathering information and acting on it. Before, in—in my other life, I guess, my family didn’t have any money. Most of my grandmother’s wealth was liquid, so between the caravan raid and the civil war in Honey, all of that disappeared. But because she’s alive, I have access to power that I didn’t have last time.”

“But you wanted more. Power, that is. The power you already had was not enough.”

“Exactly.” Sakura regarded Itachi with a haughty upward tilt of her chin. She pushed past the discomfort crawling across her skin. “The Uchiha Clan draws their nobility from martial heritage and conquest, not commerce and politics. More diverse power means more choices, more options to begin with, and the means to execute plans directly rather than just paying someone else to do it. So, I accepted.”

Itachi regarded her right back. “I see.”

“Anything else?”

“Not presently. I’ll speak to you soon.”

Sakura ground her molars together: a terrible stress tic Lady Tsunade had spent months training out of her. “Don’t even think about running off again. How am I going to find you if I need you first?”

Itachi lifted an arm; the crow that had found Sakura earlier flew down from a nearby tree and landed on his wrist.

“This is Echo,” Itachi said. “I’ll teach you how to call her. It isn’t like summoning a contracted entity. She’s fast, and discreet when she needs to be. If we’re apart, this will be our best way of communicating privately.”

Well, Echo had the discreet part nailed. She’d been sitting in a tree right overhead, and Sakura hadn’t even noticed. The girl tilted her head. The crow mimicked the motion.

“Well.” Sakura glanced all around, as though the secret to ending conversations with Itachi Uchiha lay hidden in a nearby bush. Nothing. Painfully awkward it was, then. “Goodbye.”

She skittered indoors, right into the embrace of two very, very worried parents. At last: familiarity.

It didn’t matter, she’d said. *It didn’t matter*. Wistfulness chased Itachi all the way home. In his previous life, he’d had precious little time for wandering deep in thought; he took advantage of the present calm and relative safety, and let that wistfulness carry him away. He found himself in a tree: a magnificent beech he recognized from the other Konoha. Sitting in its branches, he leaned back against the trunk and pondered.

It hadn’t mattered. What really ought not to have mattered was *why* she’d said it, and if her words had merely concealed some deeper, truer meaning. And yet Itachi found himself pondering those very questions. There’d be no use in asking her directly. Sakura’s was the sort of stubbornness that went right to the core. The mokuton chose

well. While she lacked the deep reserves of a pure Senju bloodline, Itachi had no doubt Sakura would make up for the deficit with a clever mind.

Then where did that leave him? What purpose did he serve in this world, cut down to a fraction of his former strength? Sakura had arrived with a surplus—he, lacking. Was this, too, a punishment? There was no pretending around Sakura, and there never would be. He could put up as many walls as he wanted and never change the fact that Sakura knew exactly who he was and exactly what he'd done.

Like a stone in his pocket, Itachi's past pulled him beneath the current. And until the Sage's work was complete and this world's Kaguya destroyed, Itachi could no more toss that stone aside than he could convince Sakura to look past it. And yet again, he and Sakura were bound together: by conviction, by directive, by blood. Eventually, by marriage—if she intended on seeing that goal through to the end. She would, too. And she'd remind him every step of the way of who he was. He could smile, he could bow, he could serve, he could obey. But he couldn't pretend. Not around her.

Did Sakura know the depth of her hold on him? Certainly she was ruthless enough to take advantage if she knew. At first, Itachi had considered her little more than a thorn in his side: a tool sent by the Sage in order to assist him. Now, he suspected he'd gotten it backwards. There was a part of him that wanted to prove his worth to her—to make her see that his being sent here was not a mistake—that, wrongdoings aside, he wanted badly not just to *be* a good person, but to be *seen* as one.

The resentment he felt towards her for reminding him of the blood on his hands ran neck and neck with this pointless desire to be acknowledged. And Itachi could tell her everything, if he wanted. He could find her when she was alone and tell her everything: all his secrets and lies, how much he hated himself, how much he wanted to change, how much he longed to be loved one more time. Or he could trip and fall on his ass in front of her: she'd laugh just the same, and it

would hurt far less.

But that would mean giving up. And giving up was something Itachi had never learned how to do.

Hours later, Itachi jumped down from the tree. He walked home alone through lonely streets. The Uchiha Compound called to him like an angry ghost, the brilliantly painted uchiwa fans on the outer walls superimposed with images of cracked stone, blood on the pavement, kunai inexpertly thrown in final acts of desperation. Obito had killed mostly combatants. He'd left the civilians for Itachi to slaughter. This late, even the night owls of the family were long asleep. The laughter and light that poured out from this clan in the daytime was extinguished, giving Itachi the chance to slip in unnoticed. It was too painful to look upon their happiness during the day, and obscene to think he deserved to share in it.

But he didn't make it halfway up the path to the main house before a paper screen door slammed open so hard it nearly jumped the track. Mikoto Uchiha—hair ragged, watery mascara lines down to her chin—tackled him with a hug so fierce it quite literally took his breath away. She burst into tears.

“My baby,” she cried. Her hands found the bandages, and the ugly red spaces between them, sore but not serious enough to cover. “Oh, you're hurt, you're *hurt*—they wouldn't let us go to the hospital—and your brother said you were coming home, but you were late, and I couldn't *find* you...I thought....” She clutched him and sobbed, fingers weaving through his long hair, pinning him in place.

Fugaku Uchiha entered the yard, his steps leaden, his eyes dull. He took them both in his arms. Wordless. Itachi stood in the yard, frozen in place. The arms that pulled his father close, and the forehead that rested against his mother's, did not feel like his own. So many times before, Itachi had sought solace in detachment. At first, he'd had to force his mind away—from the memories, from the atrocities he'd

committed in Madara's name. After a while, he no longer had to try. Drifting away from reality came to him easily; the body left behind knew enough about surviving and killing to make its own way.

But now, surrounded by this unexpected love, Itachi lived moment by moment, breath by breath. He could not look away; his mind would not obey when he told it to leave. Loving hurt. Being loved hurt worse. It felt like dying, piece by tiny piece. It felt like drowning.

So be it. He'd learn to swim.

One step forward, two steps back. She'd trusted Itachi enough to hand over her journal, and he stole it. But then he handed it back, while complimenting her skills in battle. She'd trusted Itachi enough to make peace. But then he'd questioned her choice of language, which was not only *irrelevant*, but a transparent attempt to rile her up. *That* was the Itachi she knew: silent when it suited him, taunting when it suited him. But he didn't taunt like Naruto did, tempestuous and loud. Itachi fought dirty. He found where people hurt the most, and attacked without mercy. He wielded his aristocratic mannerisms as deftly as any sword, and both could cut an opponent down when sharpened to a razor's edge.

As per the doctor's orders, Sakura went to bed in a recliner in the living room to avoid putting unnecessary strain on her bones. Chakra treatments would quicken the bone healing process, but it didn't work miracles. Her mother and father respectively slept on the couch and floor to offer immediate aid for even the most trivial of needs. In her hands, Sakura held the golden pin, running her fingers across the bee again and again, following the raised edges demarcating insectoid segments.

Much to her relief, Sakura managed to hold off on crying until both

her parents had fallen asleep. How many times had she cried today? In the past week? In the past month? Uninterrupted time spent on high alert during and before the war meant Sakura had become quite skilled at silent crying. Sometimes, she didn't even realize she was crying until the tears fell on a book she was reading or a table onto which she'd slumped in exhaustion. But there was always good old physical pain to remind her that, despite the relentless suppression, she still felt. She was still alive, somewhere in there beneath the terror and rage.

Sakura fell asleep. She dreamt. All around her, a grassland lush with flowers undulated in the wind. Her arms, spread out like wings to catch the breeze, tapered into the delicate hands of a young woman, not a girl. Fingers wrapped around hers. Her heart fluttered like bees' wings at the man's simple touch.

"Are these your flowers?" he asked her.

"Not these. Do you want me to make you a flower?"

"I already have one."

"Where?"

"Right here."

The fingers, strong with the tough calluses of a swordsman, walked across her skin, taking paths they'd long set to memory. A warm hand cupped her face, tilted her head just so, and she looked up into black eyes full of love. Love for *her*.

“This one’s my favorite.”

Itachi kissed her.

Sakura snapped awake with a gasp, much to the dismay of her ribs. After catching her breath—slowly, deeply—she stared at the ceiling for the next hour, disquieted by the things she’d seen and felt. Itachi had loved her in that meadow—she knew it. He’d kissed her, too.

And worst of all: she’d wanted him to.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up: Local hellion fistfights minor deity, demands explanation for unsolicited nightmare

Sakura: how am I going to use this to fight if I can’t make one single solitary half-assed sprout without passing tf out

~

Itachi “My Eyes Bleed and I Catch the Vapors™ when I Use My Godlike Superpowers Too Often” Uchiha: girl walk it off if you die you die

~

Sakura:



1. Is Sasuke going to revolutionize the medic-nin world by setting people on fire?
2. Did you reblog the best Nardo post on tungle dot com???
3. Is Kakashi right? ARE plants good? Do we ALL like plants?
4. Leave a Yelp review for Sakura and Itachi's kissing shack

For those of you with mother tongues other than English,

comment in your native language and experience the thrill of me sending a reply through Google translate that I will not vet in any way.

Ready to jerk the string

Chapter Summary

Sakura and Tenzo smoke weed in the woods and talk about their feelings. Itachi touches a sword but it's like a whole thing. Fugaku has the fourth worst brunch of his life.

Chapter Notes

Itachi wearing sexy suits in modern AUs is valid but have you considered mom jeans oversized sweater Itachi who drives five under the speed limit, wears reading glasses that make his eyes look huge, and doesn't know what emails are? Pray, do.

Shoutout to my phone for autocorrecting Mikoto to Mojito repeatedly in my notes document. Turns out what Sasuke stole from the back of her pantry was rum.

Fashion from the Land of Honey is based off of hanbok because it fucks

Modern style:



Traditional style:



Historical styles:



See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sakura noticed two things within ten seconds the following morning: one, her entire pelvic region felt like someone had dropped an anvil on it; and two, her ribs hurt a lot less than they should've. The first phenomenon Sakura explained away within seconds: in her other life, and apparently in this one, too, she hadn't yet received her hormonal implant. These were period cramps. Unfortunate, but nothing to worry about.

The second phenomenon, Sakura could only speculate on. While she'd boosted her treatments from the hospital with a few tiny pulses of yang chakra—not much, just the barest amount she felt safe supplementing—there was no obvious explanation for breathing with barely any resistance. There was still pain, but significantly less than there'd been last night. There was also the enormous pit of anxiety amassing in her stomach region, but that had been there since day one of her new life.

She sat up in the chair and poked at her bandages; impatience led to one bandage's entire removal. Underneath, Sakura witnessed a similar story: while the laceration had not healed completely, the wound looked days old, not hours, and the bruising surrounding it had paled

from blotchy dark purple to an unsightly yellow. Her parents did not know what to make of it, though Sakura suspected the mokuton was to blame. With no reason to take a few sick days, Sakura called Minato's secretary with a message to forward to Yamato. Tenzo. Whatever name he planned to give her.

Sakura didn't need the assistance, but she let her mother help her get dressed all the same. If all Mebuki wanted was to coddle her daughter a little after reading Sakura's intake report last night, Sakura was more than happy to let her have it. Besides, it was nice seeing her mom again. So many people in this world were different from their otherworldly counterparts, but not Sakura's mom. She wore finer clothing, ate finer food, and moved with finer mannerisms, but underneath the surface, Mebuki was the same doting parent she'd always been.

"Shame about the hair," she murmured while fluffing Sakura's heinous bob. "I know you loved wearing it long. Do you think you'll let it grow back out, or go short like me?"

A full length mirror held by an attendant reflected Sakura's look for the day. Her mother had elected for a modern-traditional Honey style over Fire Country garb: a short butterscotch jacket over black undershirt, with a black wraparound skirt embroidered with bees of black silk.

"You know..." Sakura smoothed out her skirt, her fingers lingering on the bees; even without looking, she could feel the shape of their little bodies as clearly as if she'd laid eyes on them. "I might grow it back out. We'll see."

Mebuki smiled. With an elaborate twist, she fastened Sakura's jacket with the golden pin. "In the meantime," she said, "you can keep this right here. Until you decide."

Sakura kept one hand on the pin all the way to Senju Forest, which bordered the Forest of Death. This particular stretch was most famous as the forest Hashirama Senju meditated within while perfecting medical ninjutsu. It also happened to be the place Yamato chose for their first official training session. He greeted her with a familiar composed demeanor and bid her to follow him through the trees. Five minutes later, they arrived in a circular clearing. Two wooden chairs sat at a wooden table.

“Yours, I assume.” Sakura took a seat when Yamato, as polite as the one from her world, pulled out the chair for her. “Or do dining room sets spontaneously generate in this forest?”

Yamato took the seat across from her. “If they did, I think the local carpenters would be out of a job.”

“You haven’t managed that yet?”

“Ah.” Yamato raised a finger. “It’s your first day, so I’ll give you a freebie. But as we go on, expect a lot of frustrating silence. The mokuton benefits from meditation and long thinking, not quick answers. But, to answer your question: no, I have not yet managed to monopolize the regional furniture industry. That’s because—” With the edge of his knuckles, Yamato rapped the surface of the wood. The sound was muted, as though the wood were soft inside. “—this is still live wood. It’s still going through the motions of being a plant. If I left this here, eventually it would become a tree—a very oddly shaped tree, but a tree. If you left a dining room set in its place, that wood would eventually decompose, since it’s already dead.”

“*Oh.*” Sakura was enthralled. If this was day *one* of training, then she had many exciting months ahead of her. “So how do you get it into this shape?”

“One freebie and one freebie only.” Yamato rested his forearms on the table. “Now, we ought to begin with proper introductions.”

Sakura blushed. She hadn’t even asked his *name* yet. They’d interacted at the hospital, of course, but that hadn’t been a Proper Introduction. Yamato waved away her stuttered apology.

“It’s been a busy few days for you. No offense taken. I’ll go first. You’ll hear people refer to me as Yamato. That’s a code name for me when I work with Konoha’s special forces. I go by Tenzo when the ANBU mask is off.”

Sakura blinked. So this was a *mentorship* mentorship. Secret backstory revelations unlocked on day one and everything. Tenzo chuckled. “We’ll be seeing a lot of each other in the future. And I’ve seen enough of you from the past twenty-four hours to know you’re intelligent, curious, and determined: a triple threat. I’m sure if I hadn’t told you who I was, you’d have found it out on your own within a week.”

“And I’m Sakura. Genin, daughter of Mebuki, daughter of Satsuko.”

“Pleased to meet you officially, Sakura.”

“So what now?”

“Now?” Tenzo reached into his pocket, extracted a small packet of tissues, and sat them on the table between them. “We’ll probably need these in a bit,” he offered as explanation to her questioning look. “I wanted to start by offering you the chance to ask some questions. Anything basic, I’ll answer upfront. Anything specific, like techniques or form, will come later.”

Fortunately, Sakura's mind had already supplied her with countless questions last night; being forced to sit as still as possible for hours on end provided endless opportunities to muse.

"I guess...I want to know what the main goal of my training is." Sakura scratched a fingernail across the wood. It dimpled slightly: definitely live wood. "Whether it's to control something that's wild, or awaken something that's sleeping. Or...what I'm supposed to do with it. If that makes sense. And if I'll have time to work on other skills."

"Such as?"

"Medical ninjutsu. I...remember reading that the First had remarkable healing abilities. Not just for himself, but when working with patients. I want to look into that, and incorporate those techniques into my training regimen. If possible."

It wasn't a lie, really. Not even in part—spontaneously developing medical ninjutsu would probably raise some eyebrows. Besides, the mokuton was a bloodline ability, and those had a tendency to impact *everything* chakra-related in the human body. Maybe the medical ninjutsu she'd learned under Tsunade wouldn't even apply to her anymore.

Tenzo drummed his fingers thoughtfully. "We can definitely look into that. Consider it part of your regular training with me. Once we cover the basics. Now as for your first question, I'm going to give you the worst possible answer, and the most accurate one: it depends. The mokuton can be stubborn at times, overwhelming at other times. You'll be able to answer that question on your own soon enough." Tenzo paused. "You look slightly ill, if you don't mind me saying. How are you feeling?"

Sakura gulped. The anxiety that she'd noticed that morning, and

which had hounded her relentlessly since her fateful conversation with the Sage, crept towards the rim of the pit she'd been shoveling it into.

"I—" What was she going to tell him? *The hell do you mean 'depends?' Where are my diagrams, my algorithms? Where are the fences around my pasture?* With any other art—ninjutsu, genjutsu, taijutsu—Sakura's limits had always been rigidly defined: she could go this far, she could lift this much, she could use this much chakra.

"Well—" She'd always known the limits of her potential. Before realizing her own limitations, they'd been pointed out by others—harshly, sometimes, but honestly for the most part. She was an aberration: a kunoichi from a civilian clan, who had excellent chakra control going for her but little else. Tsunade had scoffed endlessly over Sakura's hesitations, but she was a Senju. The Godaime hadn't known what it was like to be less than; she was born talented out of a talented line. Sakura was just some nobody. A fluke.

"I don't—" The edges of Sakura's eyes stung. Fuck. This again. "I don't think I can do this."

Tenzo, subtle as a brick, nudged the tissues over with a forefinger. "What makes you say that?"

God, where to begin? Should she focus on the new insecurities or the old ones? Days of suppressed frustration boiled up until Sakura felt the resentment pool at the back of her throat. Taking out a trio of white Zetsu had satisfied her rage, but only temporarily. She was still angry, at everything and everyone. What did she have to offer this world but below average skills and tears?

"I'm not—I'm not *him*. I'm not the First. I can't—my control is...fine, I guess, but my chakra reserves are average at best. Maybe I can make

one little leaf, but I don't know how I'm going to make a single *tree*, let alone a forest like the First did. If I can't be relied upon in battle to hold my own...I mean..." Sakura gestured at the tissues, and sniffed away the inevitable. "You brought *tissues* with you. What do I have going for me? Money, and an engagement. I don't train with my team, apparently, and I was about to quit this job entirely before—before everything happened. I can't *do* this if I can't even control my own feelings. I'm pathetic. Maybe this isn't what I'm supposed to be doing here. "

For the duration of her rant, and after, Tenzo remained calm. Still leaning on his forearms, he regarded Sakura with a serious expression. He didn't look like he wished he was somewhere else, and he didn't look disappointed. He didn't look surprised, but he didn't look judgemental either—sneering behind a hand, or rolling his eyes. He just...sat there, and listened.

Sakura lost the battle with both the tears and her pride, and reached for a tissue. This jacket was expensive and didn't need snot all over it. Covering her face, she prepared herself for a rejection. Tenzo would be nice about it, of course, but it would still hurt. *Yeah*, he surely would say, *this isn't going to be about, like, using the mokuton in combat. Maybe you can get a job with the Yamanakas keeping the flowers looking fresh?*

"Pardon my language," Tenzo said. "But that sounds like a lot of bullshit to me."

When Itachi woke the next morning, he found his parents and Sasuke already waiting for him at the breakfast table. They looked, quite frankly, like hell. Everyone's eyes were red-rimmed, swollen with stale tears. Sasuke looked like a wilted houseplant. His father, Fugaku, looked like death warmed over. And his mother, Mikoto, looked like roadkill that someone had applied eyeliner to.

“Go ahead and sit down.” Mikoto sounded hoarse. She must’ve spent hours crying after putting Itachi to bed. Perhaps she hadn’t gone to bed herself.

“Are you...are you feeling better?”

Itachi nodded. He didn’t trust his voice to speak. Mikoto lowered her eyes. Nodded in return.

Five minutes passed. Everyone stared at their food. Chopsticks remained on the table. Ten different apologies formed in Itachi’s head, each of them shot down for various reasons: too insincere, too honest, too cloying, too formulaic. He stared at his food: banana pancakes, natto, a boiled egg. All favorites of his. He’d always had eclectic breakfast tastes. Apparently those tastes crossed dimensional boundaries.

Mikoto took a deep, quivering breath. She reached for Fugaku’s hand. He held on tight. Sasuke kept his hands in his lap, and picked away at his cuticles.

“There’s something...your father and I haven’t been completely honest with you—either of you—about...your older brother.”

Itachi looked up, into his mother’s eyes. He hadn’t seen her this broken, this empty, not since the day he’d—

“It’s time we told you about Obito.”

Sakura lowered the tissue from her eyes. Through a watery haze, she could still make out a Tenzo-shaped blob on the far end of the table.

“Whuh?”

“You said you couldn’t do ‘this’ because you’re too emotional.” Tenzo laid his hands flat on the table. Through the fingers of one hand, a series of vines rose up and danced in the air; orchids, delicate as kitten whiskers, budded from within the sinuous structures. “When your mokuton activated for you, what were you feeling? Nothing at all?”

“I...well, I was afraid. I thought I would die. I know as a shinobi I shouldn’t—”

Tenzo held up a hand, snipping off the rest of Sakura's sentence like a pair of garden shears. “Let’s not worry about ‘shouldn’t’ right now. You were afraid, and what else?”

“I was...”

Sakura died. It didn’t hurt at all.

“I felt...angry...”

“Angry at what?”

Naruto and Sasuke were dying, bleeding out in Kakashi-sensei’s arms.

Kaguya returned to her army of White Zetsu in triumphant splendor, laying waste to the remnants of humanity.

“I was angry with...”

He'd left her behind. He'd used her for information, watched her struggle without lifting a finger to help, and then he'd left her behind.

“With who?”

“Useless. Why deny the inevitable?”

She knew.

“With me.” Sakura burst into tears. “I’m angry with—with me.” Tenzo handed over another tissue, which quickly became waterlogged. Fuck, fuck, *fuck*. Well, here came the fucking send-off. *Take this one back to the factory, boys. Manufacturing defect. Will not stop leaking.*

“Would you believe me if I told you the first time I used the mokuton, I was crying?”

Sakura sniffed. “I’d say you were making shit up to placate me.”

Tenzo shrugged. “It’s true. But if you don’t believe that, then you definitely won’t believe that the First was *also* crying the first time his mokuton manifested.”

“Now you’re just being mean.”

“So say many of my subordinates. But I’m telling you the truth. When you were still at the academy, I’m sure you got the same history lessons I did. Everyone knows the First was a powerful shinobi—that he was ruthless, and used his mokuton to bend other nations to his will. That he fought tailed beasts and won. What they don’t bother telling you is what he was like as a person. I wondered, since I’m the one walking around with his genetic material. I researched, asked around. And what everyone who actually knew him told me was that he was quick to laugh, loud, got angry quickly but calmed down just as fast. And he cried. Frequently. An embarrassing amount, the Third told me. The administrative department had a tissue budget.”

Despite herself, Sakura laughed as she blotted the tears away. Every photo of the First she’d seen could’ve won best in show for intimidating scowl—more ironwood than weeping willow.

“I want you to know one thing up front. Something that took me years of pain to learn: your emotions are not weaknesses. Being sensitive isn’t a weakness. It means that you care deeply—for people, for ideas. The First was a passionate man, and his mokuton was powerful because he channeled that passion into his techniques. The mokuton has always been strongest in sensitive, emotional people. I know I don’t look like the passionate type, but I started out a lot like you. I was angry—so angry—at a lot of people. You said you were angry when you activated the mokuton—angry and scared. So was I. But I was angry at my opponent. You were angry at yourself. The mokuton feeds on our emotions, Sakura. And if that anger you’re feeling is pointed inwards, then eventually the mokuton will turn on you. It might even take over your body completely.”

Sakura sat back in the chair, already exhausted though it surely wasn’t eight in the morning yet.

“I’ve always been angry at myself. Hated myself, even. I don’t know

how *not* to be angry. I can't remember a time when I wasn't."

"Then take that anger and tame it. Channel it into something healthier. Something that inspires you. What are your goals? What makes you want to keep fighting? You took down a creature that even an Uchiha couldn't beat, Sakura. That isn't weakness, even if you left that fight broken. So, you're angry. Point it in another direction. Remove the hatred, and the self-loathing. What gives you purpose?"

The answer came as naturally as breathing. As naturally as a growing thing reaching for the sun.

"Love."

"For who?"

"For the people I had to leave behind. For the people I want to protect."

And maybe, eventually, for herself.

Tenzo smiled. "That's more like it. Now, how much do you know about meditation?"

Mikoto told a story. It was one she clearly knew well—the effortless attention to detail could not have been easily faked—but the words left her body forced, as though she'd never dared speak them aloud. Next to her, Fugaku sat stiffly, and alternated between staring into his

tea and staring out the kitchen window. Sasuke picked up his chopsticks and poked listlessly at his food: a habit Mikoto would have rebuked right away, had this been any other morning.

“Obito’s parents were both killed when he was only four,” Mikoto began. “They were some of the first casualties of the Second War. His grandmother took him in, but she passed not long after, of natural causes. Obito was six at the time. Then my family took him in, and when I married your father that same year, Obito went with me. Resources were stretched thin because of the conflict, so nearly every Uchiha family looked after an orphan. We shared what we had, even if we had little to offer. But we couldn’t adopt him.”

Fugaku picked up his tea, took a long sip, and returned it to the table. It was only from years of watching his father’s body language that Itachi picked up on the slight tremor. Under the table, Mikoto placed a hand on Fugaku’s thigh.

“The council of elders were concerned about a conflict of succession. Adoptions within the main family have always been rare, but they are generally allowed. And those children are entitled to the same rights as biological children, according to Clan tradition. But because of that tradition, the head family is never allowed to adopt. If we adopted Obito, he would have been the eldest son and therefore in line to inherit the mantle of Clan Head. We appealed the council’s decision, and suggested a caveat be added to Obito’s adoption contract: he would be entitled to inheritance, but not succession. They refused. But Obito remained in our home and we still cared for him like a son. We fed him, clothed him, and loved him. He was ours. Twice a year we submitted a formal appeal, and each time our appeals were rejected.

“And then, three years later, everything changed. Your father was meditating in the garden before a meeting with the council when Amaterasu blessed him with a vision. She instructed him to sidestep the council and go through with the adoption without their consent. We filled out the paperwork for a complete legal adoption and forwarded it to the governor that same day. Obito was nine.”

Itachi, who'd been determined to sit through the conversation as stoically as possible, couldn't keep his face from going slack with shock. Was this the gift the Sage had mentioned? Or had he meddled elsewhere, and the goddess had really—?

“The council was furious, of course, but the Clan had far more immediate concerns with the Third War looming months after the Second ended, and the matter was dropped. Life went on. Obito's training before coming to us had been spotty at best; between the war and his initiation into the head family, we couldn't afford to relax. So we pushed him. Hard. Back then, activating the Sharingan wasn't just significant, it was critical. Konoha needed us, and we responded by using any means necessary to trigger Sharingan development. Fear and hatred had always gone hand in hand with the Sharingan; the tablet left to us by our ancestors instructed as much. So that was what we turned to. We didn't even question it. Your father took Obito to the site of a battle, thinking that would be enough. But while it upset Obito greatly, nothing changed. Neither did training in the Forest of Death. We were desperate; we pushed him harder. He went on more and more dangerous missions, and came home smiling less and less.”

Itachi sat at the breakfast table. And he stood hand in hand with his father at the edge of a field of bodies, half eaten by carrion birds. *This is the world that we live in, my son. This is your future. This is why we fight, and why our village needs our eyes.*

“We had all but lost hope when it finally happened. The village had given Obito and his team permission to return to the village for two days so that Obito could celebrate his coming-of-age with the Clan. He had just finished lighting the fire when Rin, the girl on his team, walked up and gave him a kiss out of nowhere. Apparently, it had been a dare of some sort. But that was all it took. I saw the kiss, turned around to direct the guests towards the snack tables, turned back around when I heard the gasping, and there they were: two red eyes.”

Was it that easy? The Sharingan, for a kiss? Itachi had been raised on that philosophy of hatred, fear, and violence. That field of broken bodies had awakened his eyes, and he'd never once forgotten the smell. Every time he entered battle, the smell crept out of his memories, filled his nose with the stench. But even as that moment had made him a pacifist, he also considered it an integral part of his identity. His eyes had given him privilege and status: enough to save his brother, if not his clan. So everything he'd done to obtain and develop his eyes had been worth it. And now, with a few sentences, his mother threatened to undo all of that justification. As Itachi experienced what he could only call a full brain meltdown, Mikoto finished her tale. By the end of it, she was crying; two thin rivers of tears ran down her face, but her voice did not waver, even for a moment.

"Of course we were shocked. Of course it made us question everything. The Sharingan has always been associated with passion, and strong emotions. But never positive ones. From its inception, the Uchiha Clan has always been in a state of conflict: with nations, with other clans, with ideals. No one had ever stopped to wonder if any of it was necessary. We had our eyes; why question the method? But after that night, we promised to change. We would no longer wilfully bestow trauma on our children for the promise of a weapon. But the war went on. The next evening, Obito returned to the field with his team. And he didn't come back."

The bridge. The boulder. And Obito's final, terrible gift to Kakashi: an eye—all that was left of the happiest time of his life.

"We want you to have a choice, Itachi." Fugaku spoke for the first time since lunch yesterday. Itachi regarded the man; in his other life, they'd always been at odds. Peace had always been Itachi's goal; for Fugaku, power and vengeance. This man was not Itachi's Fugaku. This man was subdued, a shadow of his former self, stripped bare by the violent death of a child. Regret emanated from his body like a miasma.

"Yesterday, you were almost taken from us, and it is our negligence to

blame. The council wanted to force you into a shinobi lifestyle and enrolled you in the academy. Your mother and I wanted to save you from it, and refused to train you at home. And so you, caught in the middle of that, graduated with only the most basic of skills. Your first mission—I understand if you don't wish to speak of it—but after you came home, and we saw your Sharingan had awakened..."

Fugaku broke off. Mikoto laid a hand on his shoulder.

"A choice, Itachi," Mikoto echoed. "Going forward, there will be no middle ground. I know how much you want to be a shinobi, but it needs to be *your* choice. Not the will of the council or the Clan. And we will respect the choice that you make. If this is the path you wish to walk, we will do everything in our power to train you in earnest. No more excuses from us. But if you've changed your mind, and you want to unenlist, we can make that happen. There are no penalties for genin seeking retirement from regular duties. You could do anything, be anyone. Start a library, become a painter, raise horses. We support whatever you decide."

Itachi couldn't speak. He could barely *breathe*. On the kitchen table, Mikoto placed a sword, sheathed. A classic tachi, it was delicately curved, its sheath made of plain, full grain leather stretched over polished wood. There was no introduction, for this sword had no need of it. Itachi knew this weapon. So did every shinobi in Konoha, down to the six-year-olds entering the academy for the first time. Foreign shinobi knew of it as well, though for them the sword inspired more fear than pride.

The Sun Sword: a priceless work of art, forged by the legendary Uchiha swordsmith Yasutsuna, whose signature decorated the tang. If he extracted the sword from its protective vessel, Itachi knew exactly what he would find: a long blade, light but robust, tapered, with intricate patterns decorating the shiny metal surface. In Itachi's world, this sword had been lost during the Founders Era, presumed destroyed or kept in secret by some clandestine collector. And here it was on the kitchen table in front of him.

A choice? Itachi couldn't remember the last time he'd really had one. Violence had been forced upon him as a child, and the shinobi lifestyle had been one he'd detested every day of his life. Because for as long as he could remember, all the wars Itachi fought had been meaningless. Shisui's death had not brought peace to the world. Neither had the massacre. Neither had the Fourth War. All turned to ashes in the end, and nothing crawled out of them to be reborn.

Nothing except for him. And her.

Fugaku made eye contact with his son, and held it there. Despite his obvious nerves, his gaze was resolute. "You're turning fourteen soon—our traditional age of adulthood, and the age of a man when he receives his personal weapon. This one is yours, if you choose to walk the path of your ancestors."

Itachi took the sword.

Tenzo was an incredible teacher, as it turned out. He had his quirks, sure—Sakura didn't think Kakashi *or* Tsunade would have included journaling as part of a regular training regimen—but the fact that he showed up on time every day in a freshly pressed uniform, *not* smelling of gin, meant he outclassed every teacher Sakura had had before him. Even Iruka didn't know how to work an iron. Somebody in admin needed to get Tenzo's mug on a recruitment poster, stat.

Today, Tenzo had asked to meet her at a cafe in the Uchiha District. Because it was a proper district here, and not a walled-off quarantine designed to restrict the Clan to one area. Some Uchiha lived elsewhere in Konoha, or even in the little villages just outside the walls. But the biggest difference was inside the neighborhood. The compound was

still there, but here people understood the term to mean the area within the Uchiha District containing the main family's private homes. Throughout the rest of the district, the occupants were a mixed bunch, moreso the farther one traveled from the center.

Kakashi and Tsunade had *never* taken her to a cafe. And they certainly wouldn't have paid for her food.

"How unlike your former captain you are," Sakura said in lieu of a thank you as the server came to whisk their plates away.

Tenzo let out an awkward laugh. "Captain Hatake is a good man. Just maybe not good at picking up the bill. But, that's not why I took you here today. We're celebrating."

"Did I win at meditating quietly in the woods?"

"*And* talking about your feelings. Here's your trophy."

With a deadpan expression, Tenzo handed over an invisible trophy, which Sakura accepted with great enthusiasm. Their table neighbors raised a few eyebrows, but Tenzo didn't care so neither did she. It was *fun* having this guy as a teacher. He wasn't much for facial expressions and his humor was drier than sawdust, but he was quick with a joke and so full of empathy that Sakura wondered where he kept it all.

But that didn't mean he went easy on her. Kindness did not translate to leniency. When she wasn't meditating in the woods or journaling in the woods, Sakura was expected to do cardio and yoga in the woods. They hadn't even *touched* on the mokuton, and Tenzo had expressly forbidden Sakura from trying anything outside training sessions. Hopefully this celebration of theirs meant less sitting still and more spontaneous tree generation.

“So what’s next, sensei? Are we making saplings yet?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes.”

Sakura had *just* lifted a fist to the air in triumph when Tenzo dropped a stack of textbooks on the spindly cafe table with a weighty *thunk*.

“Where were you *keeping* those?”

“This.” Tenzo patted the tower of knowledge, and placed a brand-new journal at the top. “Is the next phase of your training.”

“Are the books...going to teach me how to make saplings?”

“Oh, no, no, no.” Tenzo waved a hand in Sakura’s direction, as though she’d just made the most hilarious joke. “You’re not ready for that yet. Phase Two is botany.”

“Oh, no.”

“If you want to master the mokuton, you need to understand its component pieces on an intimate level. That means research, and a lot of it. You’ve seen plants. Tasted them, touched them, smelled them. You mentioned research you’d done at the academy on poisons and antidotes. Medicinal things. But do you understand how they work? How and why they grow, how they reproduce, what they do for an ecosystem?”

“Not really, no.”

Tenzo snapped his fingers. “And that’s going to change, starting today.”

“So...no saplings?”

“We’re going back in the woods.”

“Yes?”

“And we’re going to draw some plants.”

“Oh, my god.”

“I’m going to pick something easy for you to start with. Something primitive. I think you’ll take to Bryophyta. No flowers or seeds. Spores. No vascular tissue. It’s fascinating stuff.”

“Bryo—you mean *moss*? You’re taking me to the woods to read about and draw moss?”

“Well, there’s liverworts if you want more botanical diversity. Different clades, same division. Depends on who you ask. Do *not* get into arguments with botanists. Nobody leaves those conversations happy.”

“You’re making me *draw plants* as part of my training. Is this art

school?”

“Of course not. Most art schools don’t start the day with a lap around the entire outer wall.”

“Come on.”

“After that, some chakra strengthening exercises. Then art school. At the end of another week, if you’re making good progress we can try listening to some plants. Low level sensory stuff.”

“Saplings?”

“Saplings think too much. We’re listening to moss.”

“I changed my mind. You’re the worst teacher I’ve ever had.”

“Don’t make me do the Scary Face again.”

Before the holy flame of Amaterasu, burning in her place of honor in the Naka Shrine, Itachi stood arm in arm with his mother. Each of them held a packet of sacred herbs pressed tight against their chest, sheltered between the palms of their hands and the folds of their somber, formal kimono.

“I can’t believe you’re almost fourteen.” There were no tears on Mikoto’s face today—just a sweet, soft warmth that stained her cheeks

a lively pink. “You look more like a man every time I see you. But you’ll always be that fat, happy little baby I held in my arms all those years ago. We weren’t sure if you would live. You were so sick, and still. You didn’t cry. But you lived. And I’m so glad you did.”

They pressed the packets to their lips: an offering, in the form of whispered regrets, old pain, and heartache. Feeling like an intruder, an unwelcome doppelganger in the midst of the Uchiha Clan’s most sacred space, Itachi made his offering nonetheless. It was foolish to think he could run from his past. The things he’d done could not be forgotten or ignored. But that didn’t mean he had to sit and wallow in his sins. He was young, and strong, and though he might carry his pain for the rest of his life, he wouldn’t get used to the weight of it by languishing in shame. In that scenario, he’d only get crushed.

It was time to move.

“Are you ready?”

Itachi nodded. Arm in arm with his mother, Itachi placed the packet of herbs into the fire. There they remained, until all burned down to ashes.

Echo arrived with a message from Itachi on day six of Mokuton Art Academy. Sakura had grown quite fond of the little bird, and often noticed a pair of shiny black eyes peeking at her from the trees. Like the other Uchiha corvids, she did not speak, but she was intelligent; she waited until Sakura finished reading the page before fluttering down to perch on Sakura’s head. Sakura opened the envelope, and pulled out a fancy-looking invitation stamped with the Uchiha seal.

An invitation to Itachi’s coming-of-age party. And a note from Itachi,

in which he apologized, albeit stiffly, for being a shithead to her the night they'd come back from Zetsu's plant-based beatdown. Sakura sat and stared at the invitation for a while, worrying the note absentmindedly until the edges tattered.

A *birthday* party. For Itachi. Well, he was a human person. Human people often celebrated birthdays. But Sakura was still allowed to think it was weird. She wondered what previous birthdays had been like for Itachi. And had he celebrated his birthday at all, after he'd killed...?

Sakura shook her head, upsetting Echo enough to receive an offended *caw!* and a firm grasping of clawed toes.

"Well," she muttered. "Guess I'm doin' this."

In fact, her whole family was doin' this. An Uchiha did not turn fourteen every day, after all, and this was not only the heir of the head family but Sakura's *intended*. For no reason other than severe illness or death would any Haruno fail to grace the property of the esteemed Uchiha Clan. The whole troupe of them—Sakura, her parents, various aunts and uncles, and her grandmother Satsuko—bedecked themselves in Honey finery and arrived at the Uchiha gates as a group. The flowing skirt was freeing, and Sakura couldn't help doing a spin or two.

Sasuke, layered in glossy silk formal wear typical of the Land of Fire, took Sakura's hand at the gate and led her in. Just like her Sasuke, this Sasuke also appeared to detest fancy clothes: he kept picking at the layers and twisting his shoulders, prompting at least two aunties to give him a rap with a folded fan.

"So *itchy*," he muttered.

“I love Honey formal wear,” Sakura sighed. “I could smuggle so much under these skirts. Form-fitting clothes are so restrictive.”

“Oh, rub it in, why don’t you?” Sasuke wrinkled his nose, so petulantly offended that Sakura had to laugh. Sasuke scowled for half a second before cracking a smile—not like her Sasuke. But...maybe that was all right. The more time Sakura spent with this Sasuke, the less in love she felt with *her* Sasuke. It was painful; this was a grieving process, not an act of forgetting. But time would heal those wounds. As much as it hurt to admit it, Sakura knew she would move on. She’d said as much to countless loved ones in hospital waiting rooms, when they asked how long the pain of loss would linger. Her Sasuke was gone. He wasn’t coming back. She’d cried over him, felt the numb ache his absence had left in her heart. It wasn’t fair to expect this Sasuke to take *his* place. The child in front of her now was his very own person, and deserved to be treated like one.

“Don’t mind if I do.” Sakura snatched a skewer of something from off of a table, ignoring Sasuke’s scandalized gasp as she gobbled down the meat.

“Not yet. Were you raised in a barn? He has to light the fire first.”

“Whuh?”

Sasuke pointed to the center of the courtyard, where a large pile of logs rested cabin-style upon a platform of stone. There stood Itachi, bracketed by his parents...looking at her. He was looking at *her*. Sakura inspected her skirts for imaginary specks of dust. Did he always have to look so intense? Without warning, Sasuke took her by the hand and led her to the front of the crowd. Satsuko found Sakura there and stood behind her, one hand on each shoulder. Supporting.

Itachi stepped towards the logs, and as one, the crowd stepped back. A second later, Sakura figured out why: hands whipping too fast for her to follow, Itachi brought his fingers to his lips and blew out the biggest fireball she'd seen outside of a full-scale battle. No one but her seemed alarmed by this, and so she clapped along with everyone else when the flames caught on the kindling between the logs and slowly, steadily, began to burn.

“Thank you for joining my family as we celebrate our son’s passage into adulthood,” Fugaku announced. “Please, eat with us.”

He bowed. Everyone else bowed back. And then the party commenced. Sparklers were lit and passed around to children, small groups split off from the main event to peruse the tables of food or admire the decorations, and everyone had a smile on their face. Sakura could hardly *feel* her face. This was all so surreal...standing here in the Uchiha Compound in a fancy dress, attending the birthday party of one of her era’s most notorious killers...it was a lot to think about for a girl of thirteen, standing on her toes at the edge of her future.

How old had Itachi been when he’d taken a sharpened edge to the people who’d made him? By Sakura’s calculations, thirteen. So he’d never had—

Finding her own thoughts suddenly overwhelming, Sakura fled from them into an adjoining garden.

Itachi had forgotten how long these ceremonial parties could take. For the first hour after lighting the bonfire, all he did was stand in place and accept well-wishes. Everyone wanted to shake his hand, pat him on the back, or inform him that he was getting way too tall. Eventually, Fugaku took pity on him and distracted the crowd with an

embarrassing childhood story while his son escaped into the night.

Overstimulated but too curious to leave entirely, Itachi surveyed the party from the safety of its outer edges. Most people clung to the bonfire, the food, the drinks, the display of childhood photos he couldn't remember being taken. Center of attention though he was, Itachi still felt like a voyeur; the Itachi in those photos, and whose hand people wanted to shake, was a stranger to him. Accepting that Itachi's favors felt more than a little like stealing. And yet, he did not want to leave.

He found Sakura in one of the large butterfly gardens set aside by the Uchiha Clan for public use. Anyone was permitted to walk its grounds, so long as they stuck to the path. But Sakura, in what Itachi imagined reflected her typical stubborn spirit, had abandoned the stone walkway for an ornamental bridge one had to hop over a low stone wall to get to. She sat with her legs dangling over the edge, clutching the wooden beams to keep from falling into the water. A whole bottle of arrack sat on the slats next to her, opened and slightly less than full.

Echo had found Sakura as well; the little crow clung to Sakura's sandals with her feet, dangling upside down above the water so that she could snap at the koi with her beak without fear of soaked feathers. Uchiha crows were not allowed to harass the fish *or* the butterflies. They made quite a pair, then: two renegades, one seeking power and the other chasing mindless joy.

Itachi considered his options, uncertain how he wanted to proceed. His last interaction with Sakura hadn't been a pleasant one; it wasn't likely she wanted his attention at the moment—or ever, unless their shared mission required proximity. But, as always, she surprised him.

“You just gonna stand there?”

It wasn't an outright invitation, but from Sakura it was close enough. Itachi stepped over the stone wall and joined her on the bridge. He knelt rather than put his legs through the beams; maybe Sakura didn't mind having her skirts hiked all the way to heaven for the sake of bridge lounging, but Itachi preferred the hem of his kimono to stay at the appropriate latitude.

"Happy birthday. Cool sword."

"Thank you."

"Sasuke told me about Obito. He said you told him he could."

"Ah."

"That's a lot to take in. Gonna be honest...don't know where I'm goin' with that."

"Mmm."

A pause settled, stretched thin and straining under the weight of things Itachi did not know how to say. He wondered if she felt that way, sometimes. Probably not. For all her lack of confidence in other aspects of the self, Sakura had a mind like a rapier. Were it not for her desire to trust and confide in others, she might have found a place in ANBU herself, one day.

"I wanted to—"

“Itachi, you—”

Another, significantly more awkward pause. Even in the darkness, Itachi caught the flush on Sakura’s face. Neither of them made any attempt to finish their sentences. Sakura recovered first.

“So,” she said. “We’re genin, huh?”

“So it would seem.”

Sighing, Sakura picked up the arrack and took a swig while Itachi looked on with a mixture of awe and trepidation. Itachi recalled many a morning finding miscellaneous extended family members passed out in their yards after a night of arrack. It was not for the faint of heart. Mistaking his alarm for interest, Sakura held out the bottle, neck first. It was an olive branch if Itachi ever saw one. She watched him drink with open curiosity, tilting her head to get a good look.

They sat there for a while, drinking and lost in private thoughts, until the liquor had decreased by two fingers’ width. Itachi couldn’t remember the last time he’d drank at all, much less allowed himself to get...what did people call it...tipsy. Echo had stolen a few sips herself, and was currently rolling in circles, wings tucked in, on a nearby patch of grass. Out of the three of them, though, Sakura was by far the most intoxicated.

“Goddammit, Itachi.” Sakura swayed forward, kept from tumbling in the water by Itachi’s hand on her face. “We’re gonna have to do the goddamn chuunin exams. Again.”

Unfortunately, Sakura was correct. For the past six days, Itachi’s mother had “casually” brought up the exams no less than fifteen times, and had placed an application on his seat at the table the

previous night. In his other life, he hadn't properly taken the chuunin exams nor been part of a proper genin team; there'd been a war on, and nearly all promotions had been awarded in the field.

Sakura poked Itachi in the ribs. He didn't try to stop her. "Hey," she said. "You find anything else out? About, you know, stuff."

Itachi gave the garden a quick scan. "Not much. There's an artifact in the Naka Shrine I investigated two nights ago. A tablet. It contains instructions on how to obtain the Mangekyou and the Rinnegan, among other things. In our world, Zetsu tampered with the message in an attempt to encourage development of the Rinnegan, which was an integral part of Kaguya's resurrection. The original wording, written by the Sage himself, was intended to discourage that development. I only discovered this after my own resurrection, when Nagato revealed the truth to me. Without the Mangekyou, I can only read a fraction of the tablet in this world. But what I have read appears identical to what I read on the other tablet."

Sakura gaped at him. What had he done now?

"Is there a problem?"

"That's the most words you've ever spoken to me at one time. Like, ever." She swayed again, requiring another hand to the face to stay upright. "First you say nothing, now you say everything. Pick one."

Itachi sighed. "I thought it best to be efficient, and this particular bit of information is critical to our mission, considering its connection to Zetsu and the God Tree. And it isn't information we can act upon at the moment."

"So you're only telling me because even I know better than to fuck this

one up."

"Would you rather I'd spread the information out over a period of several hours, or abridge the content? I see no purpose in that."

"This guy. Over here drafting his memoirs. You're funny."

"We have no urgent errands, to my knowledge," Itachi continued, ignoring Sakura's subsequent giggle fit. "The house where the journals were supposedly stored is in the process of being cleared. The Clan has already discovered an additional two rooms that had been sealed off. In time, it might function as a safe meeting place, should we require more privacy."

Sakura snorted. "Private meetings at the kissing house. What *will* your mother say?"

"You're drunk."

In lieu of an answer, Sakura took another swig. "Well, *my* research has yielded terrible results. I found out Naruto is already a chuunin."

"Is that bad?"

"If you're petty like me, then yes." She squinted at him, swaying. "Are you?"

Was he petty? Itachi had no idea how to respond to that. But Sakura did not appear to require a response, as she'd quickly moved on from

scrutinizing him to picking at a knot in the painted wood. So he settled in next to Sakura, didn't move away when she fell asleep against his shoulder, and watched the fish swim.

Chapter End Notes

Patron

Itachi "Redeye Gravy" Uchiha

Checkout History

1. How to Talk to Human Beings without Revealing Yourself to be the Creeper That You Are
 2. Normal: Can You Be It?
 3. How to Bring Up Sensitive Topics in a Way That Doesn't Make You Sound Like a Douche Canoe
 4. 420 Cake Recipes
 5. Confectionary: Photos of Petit Fours the World Over
 6. Cats: All of Them
 7. How to Be a Nasty Little Thottie in a Clan-Honoring Way
 8. Am I Allowed to Enjoy Things?
 9. How to Become the Consumptive Victorian Street Urchin You Were Always Meant to Be
 10. Bro That Shit Hurt My Eyes: an Uchiha Memoir
 11. How to Be Suave as Fuck [On Hold: #87 out of 583]
-
1. Tenzo and Sakura are going to watch movies on a weekly basis and rate them on how much they both cry. What did they watch first, and who cried more?
 2. cool sord
 3. What food are you eating at the Uchiha Birthday Bash and what irresponsible choices are you making

Waited all that day, and the next

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, Sasuke goes glamping with his bitterly divorced parents

Chapter Notes

I hope the chuunin exams will highlight how much more talented Itachi and Sakura are relative to Most Other Ninja. Think about 12-13 year old Sakura from canon, and like her general abilities at that age. Now think about how it took a fancy deus ex machina Amaterasu Susanoo sword to kill White Zetsu for good. Not only did Sakura live, she took those clones OUT while Itachi's dumb ass watched from Kubla Khan's torture-dome. Where is her award, I say, WHERE.



I am so glad we are enjoying Soft Little Boy Sasuke. He is just a little man. A little boy man. Chyld.

Got a scandalized anon comment for this chapter sent in by somebody's great aunt, so here's your official warning that Sakura is not a blushing virgin (she is a blushing NON-virgin); she is a

traumatized 17-year-old combat veteran who made some unsafe and impulsive sexual decisions during the Fourth War in a desperate bid for an affirming human connection. Here you will find a reference to that act, reminisced upon in a sardonic manner.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Itachi hadn't turned Sasuke down *every* time he'd asked his older brother for a training session. Before the countdown to the massacre—months before, years before—he'd said yes more often than not.

“Hey, Itachi. Can I train with you and mom?”

Now, Itachi said yes. He said yes every day Sasuke asked, and planned to say yes every day after that.

“Well, this is a big pile of disappointment,” Sakura sighed.

Itachi gave her a sideways look. “I did warn you they were incomplete.”

“Right, but 'incomplete' could mean anything from ‘missing a few sentences’ to ‘only a few surviving fragments.’ I was holding out hope for 'incomplete' meaning ‘has some holes here and there, but overall legible and informative.’ So: a pile of disappointment. Literally.”

Sakura gave the ruined scrolls a vicious kick. They skittered across the recently-unsealed room and out through the door. In the stone

chamber beyond, an Uchiha archivist poked his head up from behind a stack of journals and glared.

Sakura waved sheepishly. “Sorry.” She sat down and poked through a second pile that contained even more deteriorated works. “Well, at least we figured out that some of this requires a Sharingan to read. That’s something. I mean, why would someone go to all that trouble unless it was important information?”

“We can’t assume importance based solely on writing technique.”

“I’m just trying to be positive for once.”

“I prefer to be realistic.”

“You prefer to be fatalistic, you mean.”

Itachi frowned at her. He’d been doing that a lot lately—not just frowning, but unwinding. He still had that air of superiority about him, but compared to the icy reception Sakura had been accustomed to, a frown was practically a kiss on the mouth. That horrible, blank look of his had started chipping away again after the birthday party, and it gave Sakura a little thrill every time she said or did something to earn an Expression, even a glower. Itachi was good at glowering. Prodigious.

Though, he was still unpredictable; the way he oscillated between transparent and reticent made her want to tear her hair out. On the night of his big boy birthday bash, he’d basically let her in on one of the Uchiha Clan’s biggest secrets—something so important, he’d sworn her to secrecy the second she sobered up. Today, on the other hand, she’d asked what sort of technique created words readable only with the Sharingan—and not just the Sharingan, but discrete levels of its

power—and he'd provided a response so vague he hadn't answered the question at all. Bastard man.

Sakura poked Itachi's shin with a foot. He stared at the spot on his body where she'd touched him. He'd been doing that a lot lately, too. "How's your training going? Heard your mom can beat your ass in a swordfight in two minutes flat."

Itachi raised an eyebrow in a way that telegraphed 'snooty.' Another Expression for the collection. Unfortunately, he did not rise to the bait, leaving Sakura feeling irritated and childish.

"Well, I'm listening to moss," she said. "It's important. Moss is a better conversationalist than you by far."

"I'm sure it is."

Sakura rolled her eyes and turned her back on him—and wasn't that an interpersonal milestone all its own—but not quickly enough to miss the ghost of a smirk on his face. What a little shit. Maybe she *wanted* him to stay uptight and emotionless.

"Anyway," she said. "I want to ask you something."

"Oh?"

"Me and Sasuke are going to do the exams together. But obviously Naruto won't be participating. We were thinking that maybe it wouldn't be terrible for you to round out our team."

Itachi was quiet for so long that Sakura turned back around, certain he'd up and left the room in protest of such a ridiculous idea. But when she checked, there he stood in the doorway, regarding her with open interest.

"I started a list." Sakura held out a folded piece of paper, which Itachi accepted. "Of stuff we need to look out for. Number one: invasion. I've been trying to look into Suna and Oto, but since relations are tense right now and I don't have clearance, it's anybody's guess what they're up to. You should see if someone in your Clan knows about Orochimaru: what happened to him, where he's going, et cetera. Last time, he was in it to steal Sasuke's Sharingan. They're not exactly a scarce resource this time around, but that doesn't mean he's not here and he won't try something. He could go after Kushina. Me. You. Ino. He's still a threat as long as we don't know where he is and what he's up to."

"Mmm." Itachi hummed in a manner that meant General Agreement: Unenthusiastic. "I'll see what I can do. My father may know something."

"Good. Second thing, if there is an invasion, we need to decide what to do. I had an idea. We need information on the Akatsuki, right?"

Itachi cocked his head at her.

"Right. And during Tsunade's tenure, I helped complete a report analyzing the Oto-Suna-Konoha conflict. I don't remember everything, but I do remember compiling a map of Orochimaru's known hideouts within the Land of Fire. What if, during the invasion, we took advantage of the chaos and infiltrated the nearest one? According to my report, there was only a skeleton crew at the time of the invasion, and Konoha uncovered several critical documents that turned out to be genuine, though most had been destroyed by whoever occupied it last. We have two months before the written exam, and another month after that before the finals. That's plenty of time to train and

plan.”

“Mmm.” General Disagreement: Unenthusiastic.

“What?” Sakura snapped.

“Is it wise to leave the village to its fate while we leave on a personal mission?”

“Personal—” Sakura sputtered. “Itachi, this is *important*. Fate of the world important. Orochimaru had his creepy little hands in every cookie jar in the region. He’ll have information on Akatsuki, Ame, Oto, the tailed beasts, whatever. We can’t afford to miss an opportunity to find that information—even a little piece of it could change everything. We’ve waited and watched enough. We need to *do* something. I’m not saying we need to go into a situation we know we can’t handle, but what’s going on out there while we’re in the village dicking around?”

“We could report the base’s location to the Hokage.”

“We’ve talked about this,” Sakura growled. “No changing things too fast. Something that major might move up Plant Boy’s timeline. You know that. The Obito thing is already huge. We don’t know what else is going on, and we won’t *ever* know what’s going on if we don’t get out there.”

“And you say the base will be lightly guarded, but we can’t know that for certain. Orochimaru is a highly intelligent man, and strategic. He tried to kill me a number of times when he was a member of the Akatsuki, and twice he nearly succeeded. You say we have enough time to train, but two months may not give us enough time to incorporate a satisfactory margin of error.”

Sakura huffed. “What is *that* supposed to mean?”

“In two months, we will become more skilled. But how flexible will those skills be? How much will we be able to adapt, should the circumstances change? Flexibility takes longer to learn than technique alone, especially where you’re concerned. I’m rebuilding the same skills I had. You’re working with completely new ones.”

“Fuck.” Sakura slumped against a nearby table leg. Itachi being reasonable and making good points upset her terribly.

“However,” Itachi continued. “While such a mission might be dangerous, we could stand to gain significant intel that we wouldn’t be able to access anywhere else. On that, we agree.”

Sakura put glowing hands to her temples, trying to ward off a headache. Re-refining basic medical treatments had been draining, but productive. Headaches were a lot more bearable these days. “We can warn people about the invasion before it happens, but not until right before. How about that?”

Itachi leaned one hip against the doorframe. “Feasible. Training ground seventeen, tomorrow, thirteen hundred hours. Sasuke will be with me.”

He flickered away, just quick enough to dodge the moldy tome on a collision course with his stupid face.

Sakura still didn't trust Itachi as far as she could throw him. Which was pretty far, and farther still with the aid of precision chakra-release. She knew Itachi felt the same about her. Regardless, they found an understanding in the physical that wasn't always present in words and logic. Violence was simple. Blood and bruises did not lie.

To training ground seventeen, Itachi brought a new sword and a quiet confidence that felt like self-respect, not arrogance. Sakura still thought Itachi was stuck up and annoying as all hell; but the more time she spent with him, the more she understood the nuance of the man. The few interactions she'd had with him in the other world painted a picture of arrogance—he'd been unfeeling, haughty, and overconfident. The honesty of sparring left little room for such conjecture. 'Arrogant' became particular; 'unfeeling' became subtle; 'haughty' became socially awkward; 'overconfident' became analytical, honest. Itachi spoke his truth. More often than not, his truth acknowledged those of greater ability with genuine respect.

Often, Itachi's truth did not mirror her own. But he was not given to delusions of objectivity. As they trained together, Sakura saw in his eyes a growing respect for her abilities, and heard in his words an acknowledgement of her progress. His initial assessment—that she had nothing to offer the mission but supplemental aid—still infuriated her. And they still argued constantly over next steps in the master plan. But Itachi had also genuinely apologized for his mistaken assumptions after their run-in with Zetsu; since then, Itachi's frustration with her usually manifested in a battle of wills between equals, not pedantic scolding. His anger ran cold. Hers ran hot. She *still* thought he was hiding shit from her. But at least they were talking.

"Again." Sakura panted. She crouched low in the grass, feeling the way it moved around her, and she sent a wave of chakra pulsing through the blades, finding Itachi and taking account of his footing. Plants did not see in the way other creatures did, Tenzo had told her. But that didn't mean they were unaware of their surroundings. Press down on a blade of grass, and the grass knew it. The rest was about selective eavesdropping.

Over there. Five meters. Pressing me down. No light. Closer, closer. There was no conversation, or semblance of an identity—just the acknowledgement of the physical. And it was enough: without looking behind her, Sakura kicked out, and felt the vibration of Itachi's shin guards ripple up her spine. The grin she tossed over her shoulder wasn't met with a scowl, like it would have had she hit Other Naruto or Other Sasuke; Itachi was pleased with her sensory improvement. He even told her so.

"Three seconds. Faster, but less stable. Try bending your knees more."

For Itachi, constructive criticism was approval. It meant he thought she could do better.

Not like she *needed* his approval. *Obviously*. But he was so damn stingy with praise that every suggestion felt like a watershed moment in team rapport.

"Again."

Two-and-three-quarters. Two-and-a-half. They trained, with and without Sasuke. Itachi taught her how to dance out of blade's reach in a way that protected her *and* forced the sword wielder into a defensive posture. She taught Itachi how to recognize a hit laden with medical chakra before it connected. Itachi taught her how to take out a doujutsu user in less than three hits. She taught Itachi a few basic medical techniques to staunch blood. Sometimes there were spectators to the violence: Sasuke, Kakashi, Tenzo, Naruto, Naruto's Hot Dad, Sakura's parents, Mikoto (never Fugaku, who still hadn't come to terms with his son's choice).

"You're a long way from mastering the mokuton," Itachi told her at the end of day thirty. "But you're improving."

“So are you,” she returned, as easy as breathing. No sass, no pointed reminder of the loss of skill—just an honest assessment. And before she could stop herself, she tapped him in the side with her hip. Itachi stiffened, as though she’d slapped him. Time slowed, then stopped, as Sakura realized what she’d done. End-of-training hip taps were for friends. Were they friends? Was she *friends* with Itachi?

Itachi blinked twice—slowly, like a cat. Without a word, he turned around and walked off into the trees, leaving Sakura to her swirling thoughts.

Tenzo traveled through forests like he’d been born and raised there. Every step was certain, and he moved utterly without hesitation or deviance from his chosen path. He knew each plant by scientific name and often introduced them to Sakura when they walked past a particularly interesting one. Today, he’d said, he had a special lesson in mind—something different, in a forest a half-day’s walk outside the village: not listening to moss, but to *trees*. Pass this lesson, he’d said, and he would allow Sakura to try waking up one single, solitary seed.

As they walked, the forest thickened, and the trees grew taller, older. Sakura brushed her hands up against trees as she passed them, listening to the flicker of...well, it wasn’t awareness, per se, but...a little flicker of something that said, *I’m alive*.

“Trees speak to one another,” Tenzo said. He held up a hand, motioning for Sakura to stop. “Most plants do. It isn’t speaking on a level most humans will ever understand.” He pointed to the tree closest to Sakura. “Listen to that one.”

She placed a hand against the iron-tough wood, and as she did so,

Tenzo took out a kunai and threw it across the clearing; it landed, hilt-deep, in another tree's gnarled root. Abruptly, Sakura's tree shifted its focus. What had been calm became alert. *Where? There. Killing us. Watch out.*

"Is...does it know the other tree is hurting?"

"It does," Tenzo said. He retrieved the kunai, and patched up the root with a mesh of live wood. "That tree there is connected to this one. They all are. When one of them hurts, the rest are alerted by way of the fungus living on their roots. It's a sort of telephone system, if you will, that can stretch out for miles. What you're feeling is that energy—that message—from the tree's perspective. Fungi and plants are worlds apart. We'll talk about that later. How does it feel?"

"It feels..." Sakura listened again. "Vast. The more I reach for the center of its life energy, the bigger it gets. It's like walking into a dark room and never hitting the other wall. It's overwhelming." She shivered.

"That's pure nature chakra. Near limitless potential. That's where the mokuton draws its strength from."

"Is it like the nature chakra sages use?"

"In a way. Let's keep walking." Tenzo moved on, and Sakura followed. Deeper and deeper into the forest they went, until the trees were so old and tall that Sakura couldn't see the tops. "You may have read about the toad sage Jiraiya at the academy. Like other sages, he draws upon nature energy, and uses toad sage techniques to shape that energy into a usable form. But even then, using natural energy to power techniques carries enormous risks. Most sages have to remain perfectly still when drawing on those powers, or find some way around that limitation if they want to use it in a fight. Do you know

why I told you not to use the mokuton without permission, even outside our training sessions?”

Sakura approached one of the trees, and examined the trunk. Tiny bugs danced up and down the tree in little valleys between sections of bark. “It’s energy-intensive. You’re waiting for my chakra control to get better, so that I can use the mokuton without worrying about chakra exhaustion.”

“Listen to that tree, Sakura. The one you have your hand on.”

Placing her hand flat against the bark, Sakura closed her eyes, and pushed. She felt the now-familiar tug of life within the tree, and reached farther in, spreading out her consciousness like a net ready to catch messages floating by. She listened. And the tree’s simple awareness changed. It shifted, slow as molasses, until it found *her*. It reached back. Startled, Sakura instinctively retracted her chakra. But not before she sensed a single, sleepy, *Hello?*

Sakura gasped. It almost felt like...like... “Is that a *person?*”

Heart pounding like the wings of a terrified bird, Sakura scrambled away from the tree, attempting to find solace in a distance that would not come; this deep in the forest, the trees were so close together that they practically formed a single organism. She darted between the massive trunks, brushing her hands against one after the other.

Hello?

Hello?

Hello?

Voices without bodies or form, ricocheting throughout her chakra pathways without end—they were *trees*, trees that looked and smelt and moved like trees. But whatever dwelled within them was anything but.

Hello?

What are you?

“Tenzo, what is this? Where are we?”

“This is the heart of Senju territory, Sakura. Before they disbanded, those few among them with the mokuton trained and meditated here, going back hundreds of years. What you see all around you are the consequences for those who draw upon natural energy without understanding its power. Even the toad sage doesn’t tap into nature energy in its pure form; the toads’ techniques provide a thin barrier between the user and that energy, and that barrier gives the user a split second longer to escape from an uncontrollable chain reaction.” Tenzo put a hand against one of the trees, and Sakura watched as his hand became the bark, and then skin again.

“Sakura. What do plants need to grow?”

The subject change threw her, but Sakura scrambled for it like a life preserve. “I...water? Water.”

“And?”

Warmth. Heat. Sakura held up her hand, splitting the fingers to allow the fractured light from above passage onto her skin. “The sun.”

“There is limitless potential to be found in nature, Sakura. It isn’t just your own chakra the mokuton feeds off of. It’s nature itself. It moves and breathes. The more adept you become at using the mokuton, the more you will draw upon natural energy to power it. Our own reserves are far too small to power the mokuton beyond simple techniques. Even the First didn’t rely on his chakra alone. Plants must be fed in order to grow. But that growth never comes without a cost. One day, that cost might be you. Remember that.”

Somehow, Itachi and Sakura finalized their chuunin exam checklist without strangling one another. Working with Sakura on their shared world-saving mission was difficult most days and nearly impossible the rest. How was Itachi supposed to know Sakura would take offense to being told her plan was foolhardy at best, suicidal at worst? A violent initial assault made no sense. Stealth and precision, not shock and awe, would win the day. Conversations with Sakura amounted to strolls through a minefield. In the heat of battle, they got along just fine. The high stakes meant both parties were willing to set most grievances aside.

Everywhere else, they argued. The pattern was painfully predictable: Sakura put forward an idea. Itachi picked it apart. Sakura took his criticism personally. Itachi doubled down on his assessment. Sakura got frustrated, loud, and cursed him out. Itachi, seeing no peaceful path forward, disengaged, either by leaving the conversation physically or leaving it mentally.

Really, the only reason one or both of them hadn’t attempted murder was Sasuke. The one thing Itachi and Sakura agreed on completely, no holds barred, was that the chuunin exams should go as well for Sasuke as they possibly could. They had no intentions of making things easy on him without just cause—if Sasuke received a promotion by way of his teammates rigging the exams in his favor, that would only mean trouble for Sasuke and any future teams he worked with. He needed to be able to survive on his own two feet.

But...he could still prove himself and have a lovingly cooked meal three times a day, as well as decent shelter. Itachi spent four hours on a Sunday grocery shopping with Sakura with the single goal of amassing and then sealing away a variety of nonperishable goods. Mostly for Sasuke, though they each snuck a few vices in for personal use: dango for Itachi, and an entire jar of pickled plums for Sakura. There was no accounting for taste. Still, Sakura's intimate knowledge of Sasuke's dietary habits past age six helped immensely during the drafting stage of the shopping list. Though there had been a moment at the dried noodle stand when Itachi had to dodge several kicks to his shins. Surprisingly, they left the market containing all of the blood they'd arrived with.

Training with Sakura had also gone well, which Itachi hadn't expected at all. But then, there was so little overlap in their specialization that criticism had no room to get personal. Even their taijutsu styles were miles apart. Naturally, Itachi and Sasuke favored the style created and refined by the Uchiha Clan. Sakura's style was far more eclectic, reflecting her uneven training; her set included everything from Senju kata she must've learned from Tsunade to moves that hinted at modified Gentle Fist.

Past that, training sessions were more about learning to work together in a way that leveraged, rather than hid, their differences. Itachi and Sasuke favored medium range, and Sakura favored close range. Itachi favored weapons and genjutsu, Sasuke favored ninjutsu, and Sakura favored taijutsu and genjutsu. Kakashi was...there. Supervising. Technically. On paper, maybe. Itachi hadn't seen the man in days.

Everything was different. Everything was the same.

Team 7 took the mission to escort Tazuna, the bridge builder, back to the Land of Waves. The same. But this time, Sakura was ready for the

first ambush, and pointed out the puddles to Kakashi with a tip of her head and a scratch on her right ear. The Kiri chuunin were denied their ambush, forced from the puddles by a pulse of lightning chakra from Kakashi and quickly restrained by Naruto and Sasuke. Different. Kakashi fought Zabuza and got trapped in a water prison. The same. Naruto, Sasuke, and Sakura harassed Zabuza to the point where he actually *retreated*. Different.

Naruto made friends with the little kid. The same. Nobody spent hours running up trees; there was no need to, as they'd all mastered chakra-walking ages ago. Different. But those were trivial things. What did it matter if Kakashi wasn't bedridden this time around? He still moped around the house reading while Naruto cavorted in the woods, returning with tales of a pretty girl he'd met. The same. Sasuke played chess with her. Different.

But what about the really important things? What about the things that *needed* to change? How much did Sakura have to push to force her will upon the world? How much change before things spiraled out of control? Sakura spent days careening wildly between paralyzing fear of meddling with the timeline to fits of absurdism. She thought: maybe that kid I passed a wad of bills to would start up a goat farm, and then he'll make cheese and sell some bad cheese to Orochimaru, who would eat it and die, thus changing the timeline beyond any hope of predictability. Maybe.

Zabuza and Haku attacked them on the bridge. Sasuke and Naruto got trapped in a ring of ice. Sasuke awakened his Sharingan, then went down with a well-placed shard of ice. The same.

With no fox to unleash, Naruto defeated Haku with skill, wit, and pure grit. Sakura protected Tazuna from Zabuza—successfully, with Kakashi's assist. Different.

Haku died with Kakashi's hand around his heart. Zabuza died in a blaze of glory, taking Gato and his thugs out with him. The mob left

the bridge. The villagers protected their own. The same.

Sakura took Zabuzza's sword home. Mikoto might like it, she thought.

Different.

"That's creepy as hell." Sasuke dug around in his pockets for his exam form, pulling out a waterlogged lump that barely unfolded without falling apart. "I fell in the stream again," he interjected. "I was catching more fish to try that wound sterilization thing I'm working on."

"Any progress?"

"Yeah, I've been eating a lot of charred fish. Anyway, I hope that Yamato guy at least took you out for ice cream or something. People turning into trees sounds like nightmare fuel."

"No ice cream, but he *did* let me sprout some vines and wave them around. I can't make anything else sprout right now, but he said it's easiest to train the mokuton on whatever came out of the user first."

"Oh, cool. You could strangle people with them."

"Sasuke, you have a beautiful mind."

"We're here." Itachi stopped short in front of the administration

building, nearly sending Sakura and Sasuke nose-first into his spine. They'd been chatting nonstop since Sakura came to the main house to pick them up; it was a miracle one or both of them hadn't tumbled into a ditch for all they paid attention to where they were walking.

Sakura pulled them aside and waited for the next group to pass before whispering, for the tenth time, her instructions for the first portion of the exam; Itachi hardly needed the reminder—he'd put the tips to memory the first time around—but the repetition seemed to soothe Sasuke's nerves, so Itachi kept his opinions on instructional redundancy to himself. First, pass the genjutsu test, then take the exam. Sasuke was to use his Sharingan to copy either Sakura's or Itachi's answers, depending on where they were seated. The last question was a trick. And so on.

The low-level genjutsu placed by the chuunin guards barely gave them pause, and they continued on their way, hugging the walls of the crowded hallway. They were about halfway to the exam room when an unholy creature arrayed in green spandex manifested on the second-floor mezzanine.

The creature, an embryonic form of the formidable taijutsu master Maito Guy, proceeded to call Itachi out by name and inform him that they were now eternal rivals for Sakura's affection. Evidently, betrothals could not stand in the way of True Love. The creature then challenged Itachi to a deathmatch on the spot. Itachi looked to Sakura. Surely she, as someone who knew this creature personally, had some sort of calming method at the ready so that Itachi would not be forced to beat up a 14-year-old, should the situation escalate.

Sakura did not attempt to calm the creature; in fact, she fanned the flames by telling him that his eyebrows were very handsome, and that she would not be opposed to viewing them at close range. As *friends*, of course.

The situation escalated. A camera appeared in Sakura's hands.

She could barely keep it steady, though; both she and Sasuke were laughing to the point of tears and wheezing as they watched Itachi dart all over the courtyard in an attempt to avoid hurting the obnoxious, but otherwise innocent, Rock Lee. Guy himself interrupted the fight moments later, but not before Lee managed to get in one punch that Itachi had to make a slight effort to avoid. Itachi returned to his team, eyes narrowed and feathers ruffled, and found them entirely unrepentant.

“Well, *that* was random and unexpected.” Sakura gave him a mean little smile. “You did great, though. Really put him in his place.”

Sasuke flipped through the polaroid photos, wearing a shit-eating grin as he waved around the shots that hadn’t yet developed. Itachi chose not to inform him that shaking the photos actually worsened the quality of the final product. That would show him.

“Did you get the bit where he did a backflip and Lee’s going right under him with the bandages all out?”

“Oh, I *definitely* got that.”

Well, there were all sorts of ways to strengthen team rapport. A little embarrassment was worth it to acquire Sakura’s temporary cooperation, and any amount of embarrassment was worth it to make his little brother smile. Unfortunately for Sasuke, the photos mysteriously vanished during the last leg of their short journey. Itachi watched Sasuke tear through his bags in search of the priceless artifacts, relishing the warm affection that always bloomed in his chest whenever Sasuke was around. He didn’t help Sasuke look, though, and he definitely didn’t tell Sasuke that the photos had been in his older brother’s kunai pouch for going on ten minutes.

Maybe he *was* petty.

Sakura hated camping in the Forest of Death. She'd hated it the first time, and she hated it now. Fortunately, her current situation far outstripped her initial go-round in terms of comfort. Back then, she and her team had slept in dank, hollowed out trees, eating sawdust-flavored rations because they'd been too terrified to start a cook fire. This time, she camped in style in an ANBU-grade 3-man camping tent that Itachi had "borrowed" from an older cousin. It boasted built-in camouflage genjutsu, *real* futons, and safety features that allowed for an indoor camping stove.

Outside the tent, Itachi rigged up enough traps to kill or maim an entire army. Sakura and Sasuke observed with hushed reverence as their de facto captain set up a no-man's-land of trip wires, explosive seals, and all manner of pointy things—this was paranoia as performance art, and Itachi was its biggest star. Echo perched in a nearby tree to serve as an additional safety net. But, in Sakura's opinion, if anyone made it past all those traps and got close enough to trigger an alarm call, then they deserved to have Team Sasuke's heaven scroll without anybody putting up a fight.

Sakura got the camp stove going, determined to make omelets for lunch; the cooking scroll contained a pantry's worth of dried spices raided from Mikoto's kitchen. Chives and thyme sounded nice. Chives, thyme, and the fresh mushrooms she'd picked along the way. Foraging had always been a skill of hers; now, between the mokuton and her knowledge of poisonous plants, there was a whole grocery store out there in the woods just waiting for her to exploit.

"You like mushrooms, right?" She asked Sasuke absentmindedly. She was pretty sure he liked mushrooms. Itachi left the tent.

"Yeah, I like mushrooms," Sasuke said. "Can't believe you're making me an omelet in the Forest of Death," he followed up at a mumble.

“I mean, why not? How are you feeling, by the way? Do you need me to check your leg again?”

Sasuke rolled his eyes. “I tripped and fell on a rock, Sakura.”

Sakura slid the omelet onto a plate and passed it to Sasuke after arranging the chives in an aesthetically pleasing configuration. “And if that rock was coated in a deadly bacteria, you might die.”

Sasuke grumbled, but consented to a wound check. “How are you making it numb without medicine?”

“The nervous system is full of electricity. I’m using my chakra to throw a few breaker switches.”

“Electricity...” Sasuke’s face scrunched up in thought. “Electricity... maybe...lightning chakra? Not fire, *lightning*. Yeah? Yeah.”

“Sasuke, what the hell are you talking about?”

“Nothing. I have to read another book.”

“What?”

Itachi returned to the tent, now carrying an earth scroll. Sakura gave him a nod. Fighting Zetsu, digging for information on Akatsuki...that was hard. It would’ve been hard in any life. Stealing shit from other

genin? Easy. Easy enough that Sakura felt a tiny bit guilty, even on behalf of the foreign teams.

“Who did you get that scroll from? That was so *fast*.” Sasuke asked Itachi. He reclined on his futon, watching his brother with eyes wide open.

“The team from Oto.” Itachi gave Sakura a meaningful nod. “They won’t be bothering us.”

Sasuke stared at Itachi. Then he stared at Sakura. “When did you guys get so good at stuff?”

Sakura felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up. Did he suspect —? No, of course he wouldn’t. That was silly. But now she felt jumpy, and chose her words with caution. On the other side of the tent, Itachi seemed to agree: he gave her a slow shake of his head. *Just a coincidence. Don’t fuck it up.* Sakura cleared her throat and flipped her own omelet. Perfectly cooked. Amazing.

“I mean, we’ve been training our asses off.” Another nod from Itachi. Approval: a rarity.

“Yeah, I guess.” Sasuke sat up. “Is that why you started cussing so much all of a sudden?”

Sakura blushed, thankful that the heat and steam from the stove hid it. *Actually, Sasuke, Sakura did not say, the thing is, I’m not really the sweet, sheltered little girl I’m supposed to be. I have been through hell and a half, my man. Listen. I didn’t get one single fucking minute of sleep for the entirety of the Fourth War, short as it was. My blood was half amphetamines, there was a creepy plant man who kept killing people and wearing their faces to assassinate other people, and I didn’t know where*

Naruto or Kaka-sensei or Other You or fucking anybody was, and I'd basically been having a breakdown in slow-motion for the past year, let's be honest, and so when that goddamn Iwa chuunin came up and gave me a love letter, I just told him to take me for a ride. He was not wearing protection, Sasuke. He came inside of me, Sasuke. Do you know how terrifying that is when there can be consequences? I lost my virginity to that sad little man, Sasuke. I know it's a meaningless social construct or whatever but please. Do you think I liked myself even a little? Do you think I felt strong and capable? Cussing was all I had some days, Sasuke. It was all I fucking had.

“Uh...yeah,” Sakura said. “Probably.”

“All right.”

They went to bed full, warm, and satisfied. Sakura lay in her futon and stared at the roof of the tent. She breathed in deep—in, out, in, out—and fell asleep to the rhythm of billions of tiny, green life forms settling in for the night.

Kabuto ambushed them the next day. Really, Sakura should've seen it coming. And she had...sort of. After the business in Wave, she'd gotten to thinking about threads of fate, and as much as she casually accused Itachi of fatalism, she wasn't far behind in terms of accepting predestination. This was the chuunin exams. They were in the Forest of Death. Orochimaru existed and liked fucking with people. So why *wouldn't* Kabuto attack her team? But could she really go around thinking everything happened because That's How Things Were?

Kabuto went right for Sasuke, though, and *that* Sakura and Itachi were prepared for. A great number of team training hours were dedicated to viciously protecting Sasuke by any means necessary, an exercise which had made Sasuke incredibly worried. But it had all been worth

it to see the bald shock pass over Kabuto's face when Itachi and Sakura went after him with a double lariat pilfered right out of Kiri's A-B combo playbook.

It was lopsided as all hell—she and Itachi hadn't worked together nearly long enough to perfect it, and Sakura couldn't put any chakra behind her arm without imbalancing the maneuver—but the technique nonetheless served its purpose: Kabuto was forced into defensive mode, made herdable by Itachi's speed and precision and Sakura's tenacious strength. Konoha would want him alive for questioning, after all; otherwise, Itachi would have run him through with his fancy new sword. Not bad.

Sakura and Itachi landed gracefully on their feet, pinning Kabuto up against a tree. Sasuke crouched behind them, facing the opposite direction with a kunai at the ready. While Sakura and Itachi dealt with the Problem, Sasuke's job was to keep out of the way and watch their backs. Sakura allowed herself half a second to collapse internally with hysterical laughter. *Her*. Protecting *Sasuke*.

"Expecting me?" Kabuto was down—panting, injured, and jumpy—but he wasn't out. Sakura kept up her guard; while this man wasn't yet the reincarnating mastermind of a Snake Sage he'd become, that didn't mean he wasn't dangerous. "That's interesting. Did the moss tell you I was coming, Sakura-chan? I heard it's quite the conversationalist."

Sakura did not blink. She did not freeze. But a little ball of dread began forming in her stomach, fueled by wild paranoia and speculation. How had he—? But there was no time to think about it now.

"Stuff it, weirdo. Where's your snake-fucking boss?"

Kabuto tilted his head towards the sky; sunlight reflected off of his

glasses, obscuring his eyes. “Oh, that’s *very* interesting. And how, exactly, would you know a thing like that?”

“Don’t take your eyes off of him,” Itachi murmured. “He’s slippery.”

“Oh, Itachi-chan,” Kabuto sing-songed, “Somebody needs to brush up on their zoology. Interesting, interesting...” There was a rustling sound, like wind on dry leaves, and then Kabuto’s skin began to dry and flake off—smaller pieces at first, and then large sheets that blew away in the wind like downy feathers.

Itachi shot forward, sword out, and stabbed Kabuto’s clone through the heart. Sakura listened; all around her, the forest ebbed and flowed with life. The roots beneath Sakura’s feet murmured— *Over here, over here. Pressing me down.* Without taking her eyes off of the scene in front of her, Sakura sent a kunai flying to the right. It hit another tree with a *thud*, sending birds scattering, panicked, towards the upper canopy. With a sound like a sigh, the remnants of the clone crumbled into dust.

Though she knew there would be nothing there, Sakura searched the area around her kunai as Itachi saw to Sasuke, who was anxious but otherwise unhurt.

“Nothing,” she reported to Itachi. “No footprints, no blood.”

“It isn’t safe here.” Itachi sheathed his sword. “We should relocate.”

“Why not head to the tower early?” Sakura had wanted to conduct a little more recon. But Kabuto’s visit, while unsurprising in the grand scheme of things, had been unprecedented, and the dramatic shift in events set her teeth on edge. Even Itachi was unsettled, patting Sasuke down as though the boy had fallen off a cliff into a ravine.

“That may be for the best. Sasuke, how is your injury?”

“It’s *fine*.”

Picking up their supplies in record time, they raced off to the west, running full-tilt for twenty minutes until they arrived in another, thicker area of the forest. Here, even less sunlight filtered through the leaves. Monstrous flowers grew amongst roots so thick Sakura couldn’t wrap her arms around them. Shadows crept around off in the distance—more tigers? Or something bigger, more fearsome?

Sakura knelt on the forest floor, listening. *Four paws, big. Tiny paws, tiny paws. Digging me up. Eating me whole. Watch out, watch out.*

“He’s not going to follow us, is he?” Sasuke glanced around nervously, his Sharingan darting from tree to tree, shadow to shadow. But he wasn’t trembling. A second kunai joined his first; he spun them restlessly by the ringed pommels.

Itachi and Sakura shared a glance behind Sasuke’s back. “Not really his style.” Sakura muttered. This close to the tower, it wasn’t likely Kabuto would come back for round two. He preferred to ambush his prey, not give pursuit.

Pressing her hands palms-flat against the earth, Sakura closed her eyes and pushed. Casting a wider net would tire her out quicker, but for an opponent as canny as Kabuto, a few more seconds of warning could be the difference between walking out of the Forest whole, or not at all.

Sasuke crouched beside her. “What do you hear?”

Nothing interesting. Animals walking here and there across the grass, leaves straining to reach the sun, a pitcher plant dissolving a bug in its digestive fluid. *Grow, grow, unfurl.*

“I think we’re good.”

Pressing me down, long, long, long—

“Wait. There’s something...”

An echo of a hand on the earth—two hands, and one very long, scaly body.

Closer, closer. Sliding. Big, big, long—

Sakura’s eyes snapped open. “Orochimaru.”

The central tower was another twenty minutes away at a dead sprint. They made it in ten.

A curious assembly met Team Sasuke at the base of the tower, catching them as they collapsed at the threshold, pulling them the rest of the way in to safety: Naruto’s dad, Ibiki, Shikaku, Tenzo, and a woman Sakura vaguely recognized as Orochimaru’s former protege. Anko? No one spoke until the doors were bolted shut. Even then, the interaction was brief: an order, and nothing more.

“This way,” Minato said. “All three of you.”

“Wait.” Breathless, Sakura stepped to the front of her team. “Lord Hokage, we think Orochimaru is—”

Minato cut her off with a hand signal: *quiet*. Behind him, Ibiki and Shikaku exchanged a look. “We know,” Minato said. “Not here.”

He led the somber parade through an unmarked door, which led to a stairwell so deep, Sakura had to squint to see the bottom. There was no explanation. As they headed down and down, that little ball of dread in Sakura’s stomach expanded until she could feel a push against the back of her throat.

“Tenzo.” Sakura caught up with her teacher at the next landing, and put a hand on his upper arm to ensure his complete attention. “Kabuto came after us first. That gray-haired genin from Konoha.”

Another flight down. Another landing.

“We know, Sakura. Wait.” The look Tenzo gave her was almost sad. This close, Sakura could see the reddish tint to his waterline, and the dark circles underneath. Somebody hadn’t been sleeping well. Sakura bit her tongue for the remainder of the journey, pausing every so often just to check on Sasuke and Itachi, who looked worried and blank, respectively.

At the bottom of the stairs was a door, and through the door was a laboratory, an autopsy suite, and a morgue. An attendant stood next to a slab, pulled out from the wall with a shrouded body resting on top.

Minato herded Sasuke, Itachi, and Sakura to the front, motioning for them to approach the slab. “This body was found at the base of the tower twenty minutes ago. There are signs of a struggle. A short one. Whatever took him out did it in one hit, and so far we’ve found no obvious signs of a fatal wound.” The ball of dread began to spread throughout Sakura’s entire body, numbing her extremities and sharpening her vision. Minato looked her in the eyes. “When did you say Kabuto attacked you?”

“It was...half an hour, maybe? A little more or a little less.” Next to her, Sasuke nodded. Itachi had not looked away from the body since the moment they entered the room. “He went after Sasuke.”

Minato’s demeanor shifted, then, into something like pity. He pulled down the shroud, revealing the corpse’s face: eyes open, skin twisted into an expression of shock. Kabuto.

Sasuke swore. Itachi didn’t move. Sakura gripped the slab so hard her fingers ached.

Minato turned to face her, one hand resting on Kabuto’s motionless chest. “We’ve been monitoring him for some time now on suspicion of colluding with Oto. But we had no idea of the extent of his involvement until quite recently. After your hospital visit, Sakura, the staff notified me that your medical records had been partially stolen and the rest tampered with. Not long after, we began picking up chatter in neighboring nations relating to your mokuton abilities.”

Sakura released the slab, and sat down hard on the floor.

“It wasn’t Sasuke Orochimaru was after, Sakura. It was you.”

Ibiki's questioning was mercifully brief; for now, Ibiki said, their recollections of the fight would suffice. Should Interrogation need further information, they would be contacted. Minato, Ibiki, and Anko left after that. Tenzo remained and sat on the in-suite couch with Sakura until she felt she could get up without tearing her hair out and munching the drywall to release the tension. Instead, she and Tenzo stole a potted plant from the hallway and increased its size by a factor of five; it was stress relief, Tenzo said, *and* good practice. After, the plant returned to the hallway to be someone else's problem.

Now it was two in the morning; Sakura was beyond exhausted but couldn't sleep. As Sasuke dozed on his futon in the corner, Sakura huddled on the couch in a nest of blankets. Itachi, also awake, returned from the kitchenette with two cups of tea. Something light and vegetal for him, and chamomile for her. She accepted the cup with a murmured thanks. Any other day, she'd have analyzed the gift to the extreme—why had Itachi made her tea? Was this a bribe? Was this a message? Had he put something in it?

Maybe it was just tea. Right now, she needed it to be.

"Why is it us?" Dried chamomile leaves floated to the surface, jostled from the bottom as Sakura swirled the liquid around and around. "Why here? Even if we do manage to change things, nothing will be different for *our* world. Who are we even saving besides ourselves?"

Itachi just looked at her.

The muffled calm of the tower was not natural. Each team suite was soundproofed from all the others, sealed off, and guarded. Except for the sound of their breathing, everything was all dead air and sterility. Sakura reached for the flower arrangement on the coffee table and rubbed a rose petal between her fingers.

Help, help, help. Eating me. Help. The rose was dying, cut off from its roots and divested of its thorns. Soon it would go quiet, and then it would decay. Such was the fate of all life. Somewhere down in the basement levels, Kabuto's body lay on a slab, preparing to meet its biological destiny. Everything born from the earth returned to it, one way or another.

Chapter End Notes

Sakura and Itachi watching Sasuke's preliminary match:



LORE INCOMING: There are so many inconsistencies and retconning within Naruto canon that some stability-establishing is in order. Like...literally what happened to the Senju Clan, one of THE founding Konoha clans? They just sort of don't exist anymore in canon after a while, which is...weird, and also not explained. So I'm going with: because they were so numerous in the area, they just sort of faded to black as their numbers grew. They're 100% still around, but no longer observe a formal clan structure because Konoha at-large absorbed their clan culture as the dominant regional culture. Like, if you started out with a core group of let's say 100 adult Senju and then (1) both your main dudes became president of this city-state you made and (2) by then you've got maybe 500+ Senju, you probably take a look around and say hey, I think we're probably good; we ARE Konoha. Being part Senju is the default, and over half of Konoha residents are related to the Senju in some way. Not everyone has the name, but it's still around. But what about the Uchiha? I have AU explanations for this. Unlike the Senju's large chakra reserves, the Sharingan is recessive. So, the Uchiha have to be more careful about lineage to ensure the Sharingan sticks around. That caution

translates into a stronger familial bond formed around a distinct culture. [The mokuton in this AU follows canon lore in that it seems to be exceptionally rare—far rarer than the Sharingan. The Senju gave up on trying to “breed” it into their number a long time ago. It shows up when it wants to, as far as they’re concerned.]

1. a 5-paragraph essay pontificating on my Lore

oh, and updates will be slower paced; the rapid posting at the start was a combination of new thing/lots of free time by the wife. She does have a Life though and cannot spend all her time editing chapters. So we will spread the updates like fine butter.

Each night, rabbits cropped the blackberry shoots

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, Itachi gets high as shit and Sakura tells Jack Skellington to go touch grass

Chapter Notes

Note: You've seen me use both 'medic nin' and 'combat medic' and I want to clarify this: all medic nin are combat medics, but not all combat medics are medic nin. All surgeons are doctors, but not all doctors are surgeons. 'Medic nin' denotes a combat medic capable of offering medical assistance through chakra in addition to standard care.

Cw: copious amounts of blood and miscellaneous chunks of flesh, morphine administration after the fact, self-administration of combat stimulants (aka amphetamines)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The preliminaries passed without incident. Save for Sakura and Sasuke's matchups, Itachi barely paid attention to the fights. None of them were particularly interesting, for one, and it was obvious most participants had been ordered to conceal the full extent of their abilities.

Sakura matched with Rock Lee and spent most of the fight baiting him to do something other than recite love poetry, dodge punches without returning them, and pose dramatically. In the end, she took Lee out with cleverness. At her current level, Sakura did not match Lee's strength but, thanks to Itachi's tutelage, she did match his speed. With a well-placed genjutsu, Sakura distracted Lee long enough to dart behind him and then knocked him out with a glowing green hand to the back of his neck. She returned to a laughing Sasuke holding a handful of embarrassing polaroids. Itachi let him be. It wasn't nice to steal other people's things.

Sasuke matched with Kankuro, the puppeteer from Suna. It was a difficult fight—Kankuro opened with several violent moves in quick succession, likely in an attempt to take Sasuke out before he had a chance to activate his Sharingan. But Sasuke was skilled enough to endure the barrage and found the chakra-strings shortly after by sending a shockwave of lightning through the floor; the energy outlined the strings in blazing light long enough for Sasuke to burn right through them with a precise fire technique. At the end of the match, the younger Uchiha returned to the second floor with a celebratory high five for Sakura, complete with a running start. It made Itachi more than a little wistful to see it: Sasuke, growing up like an ordinary Uchiha child—not his Sasuke, not a replacement, but a brother all the same.

Itachi's match ended before it even began. Shikamaru took one peek at the leaderboard and strolled right out of the arena with his hands in his pockets, followed by a pleading Asuma. The final matches were announced at the end: Sasuke versus Neji, Sakura versus Gaara, Itachi versus Kiba. Itachi and Sakura agreed privately to concede both matches to conserve energy, but unless the invasion began early, Sasuke's match would proceed. Everyone was out of the tower and back in Konoha before dark. The following morning, Itachi sent Echo with a request for Sakura to join him at a dango stand; she arrived perfectly on time, wearing day clothes in the Honey style and a flower in her hair.

"Tenzo helped me." She ran her fingers across the puffed Chrysanthemum petals. "I can't get them started consistently, but I can help keep them going without being terrified I'll turn into one. He thinks I'll be ready to do stuff with pollen and seeds next. What did you want to talk about?"

Itachi chose a skewer from the variety plate; if he was going to reassess this stand's status as his favorite, he was going to do the thing right and try one of each menu item. He took his time exploring his selection: green tea base, with a soy glaze. Good texture. Springy. Exquisite. Sakura waited for him to finish, tense in the shoulders but

without comment.

“I’ve layered several genjutsu around our table,” Itachi said. “So there’s no need to worry about eavesdroppers. It isn’t something we should make a habit of, though.”

“Okay...” Sakura tilted her head, regarding him like a curious bird. “So what is this about? Kabuto? Is it true they don’t know who really killed him?”

Yes. “Not that. This base you mentioned. Where is it?”

Sakura narrowed her eyes, chewing the inside of her cheek. “You said you thought going there was a bad idea.”

“It is.”

“So then why are you asking? You’re *not* going by yourself. If we go, we go as a team.”

Itachi tapped a finger against the table. He chose another stick. “Kabuto’s death...complicates things. This is a dramatic change, and we aren’t even aware who or what killed him, and why. Given how dangerous he became later in his life, we should avoid high risk moves until we uncover more information. Kabuto was behind every reincarnation of the Fourth War. By then, he’d perfected Sage Mode. Whatever killed him could have easily killed us. We must exercise caution.”

“So, what,” Sakura snapped. “*More* sitting around?”

“If the world has already changed this much...”

“Then it isn’t going to *stop* changing. But if we’re the ones doing the changing, at least this shit won’t blindside us.” Sakura grabbed a skewer—plain, with sesame sauce—and bit off all five dumplings in one go. Cheeks puffed out, Sakura slouched down in her chair and glared at him. A sunbeam caught the jeweled bee pinning her jacket closed; it sparkled in the sun.

Itachi knew they were at another impasse. But now was not the time for rash actions. Kabuto had not been killed by a genin in that Forest. It didn’t make sense for Orochimaru to have killed him. So he was taken out by a high-ranked shinobi, foreign or domestic. Any number of people could’ve done it. Sasori, trimming a loose end. Suna, taking out a rival. Zetsu, for who knew what purpose. Until they had concrete information, they’d just be sprinting right into a trap.

And yet, Sakura’s insistence gave him pause. She had accumulated a great deal of power in a short amount of time in this world, while his own power had waned. His wings had been clipped—hers had grown. And if the Sage had sent them here to help one another, perhaps Itachi had misread his role. Perhaps he wasn’t meant to work at Sakura’s side but support her from behind—not unlike the suggestion he’d arrogantly thrown at her during that first foray into the Forest of Death. Perhaps it was Itachi who needed saving from tigers. Not Sakura. And the Sage would not have given such a valuable gift to a person unworthy of it. If she ran ahead, perhaps it was his duty to keep up, not hold back. It wouldn’t do to dig his heels in completely.

“I spoke with my father about the possibility of an invasion.”

Sakura perked up immediately. “And?”

“He didn’t say anything conclusive, but he gave me the impression that leadership is already aware an invasion is possible. Despite whatever else has changed about this world, it’s likely Orochimaru’s resentment towards Konoha remains the same. Kabuto’s death merely gave confirmation to long held suspicions. The village will not be taken by surprise.”

“Sounds like the perfect time to leave, then.”

“Perhaps. But we still don’t know the extent of Orochimaru’s ambitions here. Konoha’s destruction was only part of his goal. He may take advantage of the chaos and capture you. Too many things have changed for us to reliably predict our enemy’s moves based solely on our past knowledge. Caution is paramount.”

“We’re going to the base, Itachi. This is our best lead. Even if we don’t find things that benefit us, there could be information in there Konoha could use.”

“We’ll see.”

More glaring. Itachi selected another dango. Sakura stole it right out of his hand, looked him dead in the eyes, and devoured it in one fluid motion.

They got lucky. Suna and Oto attacked fashionably early, minutes before the first match—Neji versus Sasuke—was set to begin. With nearly the entire Hyuuga and Uchiha clans in attendance, the battle quickly became a bloodbath as the poorly trained Oto shinobi and poorly funded Suna shinobi struggled to hold position. Itachi saw his brother and Kakashi standing back to back, both of them shooting off bolts of lightning in every direction. Mikoto pulled a keris out from

under her apron and hopped all over the stands, stabbing as she went. The Fourth had the Kazekage—likely Orochimaru, according to Sakura—on the defensive. Copies of Naruto ran amok. The ichibi's vessel, partially transformed, fled the arena with Kushina in hot pursuit.

A sharp finger poked him in the ribs. Itachi turned to see Sakura, lightly armored over her signature yellow-and-black, ready for action.

“Well?”

Maito Guy sent a Suna shinobi flying over their heads. Naruto picked up another Naruto holding a paper bomb and sent it flying into an Oto formation. Mikoto manifested Kubikiribōchō out from under her seat and sent four people flying directly into the afterlife. Things were well in hand here. Itachi placed a hand on Sakura's shoulder, and when her eyes burned into his, he felt her stubborn determination, and answered its call.

“Let's go.”

A single four-man team from Oto ambushed them a quarter mile from the walls and were quickly dispatched: Sakura took out the chuunin captain with some well-placed kicks and a handful of yang chakra while Itachi immobilized the three genin with a genjutsu. Echo scouted ahead and let them know that the lab, hidden by genjutsu beneath a large tree, did not appear to be guarded externally. Itachi's Sharingan and Sakura's mokuton confirmed the same. Satisfied, Sakura moved out, jumping down from the boughs above to stand before the base of the tree marking the entrance. The genjutsu, when they reached it, wasn't a challenge; it vanished with a shimmer after a single disturbance of its chakra circuit.

After a brief delay, Sakura opened a trap door on silent hinges and dropped into the darkness. Itachi followed. There were no guards immediately inside, nor were there guards at the end of the dimly lit tunnel leading into a central atrium. It was all going so well. So then why did Itachi feel a cold, creeping sensation clawing at his spine? Despite her tenaciousness, he could tell Sakura felt the same. Ten meters from the tunnel's end, Sakura hunkered down and cloaked them both in a single genjutsu.

“Something isn't right.” Sakura shifted her weight from foot to foot, anxious and breathy. “Why is this so easy? It shouldn't be this easy.”

At last, realism. But would wisdom follow? “We should turn back.”

No luck. Sakura shot him a venomous look. “We came this far. Look around with your Sharingan. Does anything look out of place?”

Itachi looked. And he saw, in the distant atrium, small signs of struggle: loose papers on the floor and what looked like a shelf of chemist's tools on its side with the contents shattered.

“There was a fight. It's likely we aren't alone.”

“Fuck. Then this might be our last chance to find information. This could be a botched clean-up, and if that's true, we might only have a few minutes to get what we need before backup gets here.”

“Sakura...”

“I *know* where the important documents should be, Itachi. If we just cross that big room down there—”

“Lack of caution nearly got us both killed before. What makes you think this will be any different?”

“I would argue too much caution could get us killed just as well. And it *will* be different.”

Perhaps. Perhaps not. But Itachi could not deny the potential benefits of their situation. This initiative had been high risk, high reward from the start. He knew in his bones that something wasn't right, but information was worth more than its weight in gold; with their movement outside Konoha severely limited, and their movement inside Konoha severely scrutinized, this operation might be their *one* chance to spin the board in their favor. Zetsu's spies were everywhere. So were Nagato's. He and Sakura had no allies save Echo, who didn't even know the whole story. It was this or nothing; if he could not trust in the Sage's wisdom, what else did they have? Itachi nodded his assent.

They moved on, Itachi keeping a wary eye out as they crept forward.

“This room here.” Sakura placed her hands on a door between two laboratory setups. On the other side of the atrium, Itachi could see a few cells containing humanoid figures. Most were so still he knew they were dead. A couple others twitched here and there.

“But how...these warding seals are broken,” Sakura muttered. Tearing his attention from the miserable sight, Itachi studied the door. Through the Sharingan, he could see the layers of chakra that had once been a complex, multilayered warding seal. The seal had been severed at critical junctures—cleanly, by a master. No brute force. Itachi's unease bloomed into trepidation. But Sakura did not turn

back; she swallowed, clenched her fist, and then pushed the door open.

No signs of life. Yet. The door led to a small library, its shelves full of tomes, scrolls, and intricately labeled notebooks. Itachi took one at random: troop details, finances, mission history. Sakura checked another: a bingo book, dated from a week ago.

“Itachi, this is it.”

This wasn't right. *Something wasn't right*. Sakura glanced nervously at the door. “Come on,” she said. “Get the scrolls out. We'll seal as much as we can, let those prisoners out, and then head back.” Setting up a primitive two-person assembly line, they got to work: Sakura sorted through the records, while Itachi, whose knowledge of seals was superior, stored them away.

Each new item Sakura found came with a curse and an awestruck expression. “Shit, this is *research*. Itachi, these are notes on curse seals. And this—it's a map of every base he's got in the Land of Fire. And it all looks legitimate. Research on the Sharingan...this—how is this all in one place? Not all of this was here last time, but...well, some stuff was probably classified and I didn't see all of it. This is crazy. It's *all* here.”

Something pricked at the edge of Itachi's senses. Movement. Had it been from a victim, gasping out their last? Or someone else? “Sakura, we need to leave. This isn't right.”

“I know, I know...but we can't just leave all this to get wiped.”

“If we don't leave now, we may not get a choice.”

“Fine, if I can just—oh, shit. Oh, *shit*.” Sakura held up a thick, leatherbound journal. “Oh, my god. It’s a bingo book for the Akatsuki. I don’t remember this from last time.” Eyes glittering in excitement, she thumbed through the pages. “They’ve got *everybody* in here. Wait, let me find...here’s Sasori...it lists Yura as his Suna contact. Uses Third Kazekage as a puppet...heavy metal-based poisons...primarily cytotoxic. It’s even got Zetsu and Pain...not too many details there; they don’t know about Nagato and the bodies. But holy shit, this is real. Yeah, we need to get out of here.”

They made it halfway across the atrium before a man dropped from the ceiling, landing softly at the mouth of the exit tunnel. Over standard Shinobi underclothes, he wore a loose, lavender shirt tied with Oto’s signature purple cord. A curse seal, three curved lines that met in the middle like a lily, sat between his collarbones. Kimimaro. The Bone Dancer.

“Kabuto said you might come,” He said as Sakura and Itachi dropped into ready positions. From out of his palm a sharp bone protruded, and he pulled it out with the opposite hand: a sword, made from his own body. A bloodline ability—one Sakura recognized from a particularly harrowing after-action report.

“I was sent to clear this outpost of data and refuse, and I suppose the latter counts you, as well.” He twirled the bone sword through his fingers, eyeing them like an osprey eyes a shimmering fish. “This will be over rather quickly, I think.”

So this was what it felt like, flying too close to the sun. Sakura ground her teeth and pressed one hand against her weapons pouch to comfort herself with its presence. Nowadays, she carried as least as much plant matter on her as she did basic tools: seeds, pollen, live wood. Starter items to keep the mokuton behaved until she was skilled enough to

generate wood directly from her own body.

Keeping one eye on their assailant, Sakura angled her body towards Itachi and moved close. She had faith in Itachi's ability to improvise, but this particular challenge didn't need to include unnecessary ignorance. Kimimaro tracked the movement, but remained in his current position.

"Kimimaro," Sakura said. "Kaguya Clan. Shikotsu myaku user—he manipulates calcium levels in his bones to harden and shape them. Taijutsu, close and medium range."

Itachi unsheathed the Sun Sword. It shone in the light, its blade mottled with jagged lines like sedimentary rock leading to the cutting edge.

Kimimaro made no attempt to halt Sakura's communication. If anything, he indulged her; he kept one hand on his hip, the other loosely gripping his sword. Though his face revealed nothing, Sakura got the sense from Kimimaro's relaxed posture that her warnings to Itachi, as well as her intent to fight, amused him. Now *this* was arrogance.

"Interesting." Kimimaro's face revealed nothing, but his tone reminded Sakura of all the creepiest people she'd ever met: Danzo, Sasori, Gato. "Kabuto also said you might know things you shouldn't. Where are you really from? Not from around here, certainly. But don't mind me. Please continue your preparations. Take as long as you like. I'll be here."

A bolt of panic hit Sakura somewhere around the knees; her legs began to shake, and she widened her stance by a centimeter. But Itachi held his ready position, Sharingan fixed ahead. Around his pupils, Sakura could see his three tomoe spinning in lazy circles.

“Anything else?”

Sakura lowered her voice to a whisper. “Lee said he was arrogant and prone to underestimating his opponents. But he’s got the strength and skill to back up his ego. We can’t let him activate that curse seal. Itachi. If we can keep him still long enough for me to touch him for a few seconds, I think I can knock him out. The report said he had a hereditary form of aplastic anemia; his clan might have been prone to it.”

“Meaning?”

“His bone material is strong, but his marrow isn’t; there aren’t as many blood cells being produced as there should be. If I can access his bone marrow and interrupt blood cell production, it might be enough to send him into shock. He can harden his bone from external physical attacks, but it isn’t likely his ability blocks yin or yang chakra from within. But it can’t just be a single touch. I need time.”

“Right.” Itachi shifted his grip on the sword. “Formation three.”

“On it.”

“It’s pointless,” Kimimaro droned. “Planning won’t do you any good if you don’t have the talent to back up your strategy. Neither of you have the strength or the skill to take me down.”

The cruelty of his statement might have thrown another Sakura off of her game entirely; Zetsu’s barbed dressing-down had driven her to tears, his condescension growing fat on her low self-esteem. But while Sakura knew she was a long way from true confidence, every day she

believed less and less in her own worthlessness. The words hurt. A bit of her agreed with him. But words wouldn't knock her down today.

"Oh, are we trading insults now?" Sakura reached into her pouch and popped the cork on a vial of ragweed pollen: while a common source of allergies, the techniques she'd been working on with Tenzo magnified its reactive potential. "I've said worse things to my reflection in the mirror after a night at the bars. Get over yourself."

Kimimaro held out his bone sword, the tip pointed straight at Sakura. "I'll deal with you second. Lord Orochimaru wants you alive. You—" The tip swung in a short arc to point at Itachi. "—Are not the priority. I'll kill you first, and collect the eyes as a bonus. My Lord will be pleased."

Itachi darted forward so fast all Sakura saw was a blur. But Kimimaro was more than ready for him, and met Itachi's blade with bone, keeping his eyes on Itachi's shoulders, not his Sharingan. The bone sword skidded along the sharpened steel, catching only at the end, where blade became handle. They parted, returning to their starting positions, assessing; this initial attack had been more evaluative than intending to cause harm. Sakura, ignorant to swordsmanship save for the most basic of techniques, chanced a glance at Itachi's face. He didn't look worried, exactly, but something about Kimimaro's attack took him by surprise. She could practically see the thoughts churning in his head as he recalibrated.

Sakura opened a vial of seeds, and arranged them in a special pocket designed to let the seeds scatter evenly as she moved. When Itachi advanced a second time, she followed at a slower pace and used Kimimaro's split attention to make a wide pass around him, letting the seeds scatter across the stone floor.

"If you have to cheat to use your own bloodline ability," Kimimaro taunted in between clashes of steel and bone, "Then you're useless to your village and unfit to be a shinobi."

Sakura opened her mouth to defend herself, and then Itachi astonished her by beating her to the punch.

“You overestimate your own merits.” A kunai—a unique variation Sakura didn’t recognize—joined Itachi’s sword, and Itachi now used both in his assault; the sword gave him reach, the kunai dexterity. “If you measure an opponent’s worth only by looking towards the goal, you’ll never notice them catching up with you from behind.”

Was that *her* Itachi? The one who’d watched her nearly get eaten by a tiger with his nose stuck up in the air, bemoaning her sudden drop in competence? With a chakra-charged kick, Sakura sent a lab table skidding across the floor, widening one half of Itachi’s staging ground.

But that was only the beginning of her furniture-enhanced assault. A desk flew through the air, missing Kimimaro by centimeters. Then a lab stool. Then a bunsen burner. As she threw, Sakura sent feelers of her chakra down into the pollen, tickling them awake. Kimimaro dodged every piece of equipment, though Itachi managed the same with more fluidity.

Sakura felt the pollen as it began to shudder and multiply, exiting the vial to become a thick, yellow cloud that hovered around her eye level.

Two more stools rocketed across the lab; one, Kimimaro dodged as he’d dodged all the others, but the second one hit him, and he stumbled, falling down to one knee. He held up his sword with both hands—one gripping the hilt, the other holding the edge between thumb and fingers—and blocked Itachi’s strike.

But the attack had its intended effect: startled, Kimimaro whipped his

head up to mark his opponent, and looked Itachi directly in the eyes. The genjutsu froze him up for only a moment, but in the heat of battle one moment was more than enough: Sakura ran forward, skidded on her hip the last couple meters, and as she passed underneath the swords' point of contact, she released the pollen with a puff of air, directly onto Kimimaro's face.

The effect was immediate: his eyes reddened and swelled, and he began to cough and grab at his throat. But either the pollen manipulation hadn't been strong enough or the man was just that damn stubborn, because he blocked two of Itachi's incoming strikes and protruded a bone to catch Itachi's sword as it went for his ribs.

"If all you have is little tricks, perhaps my Lord will excuse me for putting you down on principle." Kimimaro stood, and traded with Itachi a series of close-quarters kicks, punches, and swings before the two broke apart again.

"Says the guy who looks like the bad end of a beehive."

Kimimaro shifted his attention to Itachi. "Still fighting? I would've thought you'd be dead by now, Uchiha."

Itachi didn't respond. *You aren't worth further discussion*, his silence implied. *I said what I said*.

Kimimaro scowled. "If that's how you're going to be, then why don't I put you in your place with a bit more finesse. You could use some instruction in that regard." Standing tall, Kimimaro shifted his weight to the balls of his feet, and held the bone sword closer to his body in a more protective stance. "If the Camilla Dance isn't to your liking, perhaps you'll take to the Willow Dance better."

The sword fighting changed. Long, exaggerated swings, fluid movement, and forward momentum characterized Kimimaro's initial style. Now, he traded that mobility for intricate, close quarters work: he engaged Itachi with never more than two arm's lengths between them, struck out with sharp, decisive blows, and limited his taijutsu to sharp kicks and occasionally a jump to gain the higher ground.

Time to up the game. Sakura opened up another vial: cedar pollen. Another favorite of the hay-fever-having wretches of the world. Again, she woke up the pollen and told it to multiply, but this time she went hard on the chakra manipulation that made it so prone to causing reactions. Kimimaro had responded; he just hadn't responded *enough*. And the longer this fight went on, the more likely Kimimaro would activate his curse seal, and Sakura didn't want to hope on sudden death from anemia as her *deus ex machina* of the week.

Kimimaro and Itachi danced around one another, trading blows in a ruthless style far from the choreographed sword fighting Sakura knew from TV and movies. There was no clashing and clanging of weapons, but precise hits and excessive changing of one's grip. Kimimaro brought the tip of his blade down from above, so Itachi held his sword perpendicular and caught the bone in the middle of his cutting edge. Then Itachi got up on a table and struck out with the kunai, and Kimimaro caught the sword coming in from the other side with the edge of his guard.

The new, tight fighting style made throwing shit a bit more risky, so Sakura shifted her attention to the seeds. They still littered the ground, little specks of potential just waiting for her to wake them up. She felt the pulsing of their life energy all around her, and listened to that warm feeling in her chest wanting to be freed. Most of them had already sprouted slightly, reacting with floral exuberance to the damp environment Sakura had kept them in.

"Sakura."

And that was her signal. With her palms flat against the stone, Sakura grabbed onto that spark of life, multiplied dozens of times over, and *pulled*. Instantly, little curls of vine began rising out of the seeds, grasping for the sun that wasn't there—and, more importantly, reaching for Kimimaro's ankles. He noticed when the first tendril surrounded his foot, but didn't address it until several more had curled around each foot. Itachi took full advantage of the distraction and sent a ball of fire directly into Kimimaro's face at close range, singeing his clothes and leaving what looked like a nasty burn.

"This is nothing," Kimimaro said. Some of that emptiness had left his expression, and the marks from the burns were angry and red, even at a distance. Itachi moved in for another strike, but Kimimaro's curse seal began to glow, and expand. A whole rib cage's worth of bones protruded from his side: an impenetrable wall that stopped Itachi's sword in its tracks. "A few weeds won't stop me from fulfilling my orders to Lord Orochimaru. He needs your body, and I intend to deliver it to him in one piece. But if you insist on struggling, then perhaps I need to become flexible."

The curse seal spread. And Kimimaro changed, his skin and eyes darkening, his canines lengthening. He disengaged from Itachi with a crack of a newly-sprouted, bone-studded tail, and ran at Sakura full tilt. She knew damn well there wouldn't be enough time to dodge. If she'd been standing, maybe. Her speed was nearly where it was before, and Lady Tsunade had literally beaten high agility into her skull. But she wasn't standing. So Sakura did the only thing that made sense: she put her faith in the mokuton, and pulled even harder. The seeds all around her erupted into long, twisting vines that met Kimimaro head on and slowed him to a near-halt as he drew near. Vines weren't much for looks, but they were tough and numerous and wrapped around Kimimaro's body like a shroud.

"I *will* fulfill my orders." A tinge of desperation entered Kimimaro's voice, bordering on religious fervor. "You are *nothing* against me."

Itachi barked out a warning: "Sakura—"

Pointed bones jutted out of Kimimaro's left arm, freeing him from the vines with a *snap* as the plants gave way to the sudden expansion. The arm became like a drill: made up of a series of bones knitted together, wide at the base and leading to a sharp point. With a savage roar, Kimimaro brought the point down, on a collision course with the center of her chest. Sakura inhaled, called up the pollen, and sent it all flying; even if she died, at least she'd give Itachi a better chance at killing the bastard, or at least getting away.

The bone spear bore down on her like a train: fast, powerful, and just as impossible to stop—and then suddenly, the scene transformed. Kimimaro no longer stood before her, body twisted into something inhuman, dripping with killing intent. Everything had gone dark, dark, dark—but death did not come. The darkness was not the end of her life, but the back of Itachi's shirt—all dark, black like his eyes, save for the bright red-and-white of an Uchiha fan, which spread out before her in a protective arc. Itachi grunted, fell to one knee, and Kimimaro moved no further; the Sun Sword stopped the bulk of the drill in its tracks, but two spikes on the outside of the spiral formation had gone right through Itachi. Sakura could see the pointed ends, dripping with blood, poking through the back of Itachi's shirt. Impaled on blades of bone—for *her*.

"Itachi—"

"*Do it.*"

A scrap of skin between vines was all Sakura could see of Kimimaro's skin; she lunged for it, pressed her fingers against it, and sent a bolt of chakra through Kimimaro's body, easily finding the bones—so many bones. Too many. She'd expected as much. But that just meant more material to work with. First bone, then marrow—Kimimaro's was fatty: too much fat and too few blood cells. Sakura assaulted what cells he had, killing them off as fast as she could, and then instructed Kimimaro's immune system to finish the job for her—kill the cells, and the marrow would struggle to produce more. And eventually, the

house of cards would fall.

Above and around her, Itachi and Kimimaro struggled: more and more vines began to snap and give way; blood fell into Sakura's hair, onto her arms—Itachi's blood: thick, hot rivulets dripped down as the bone shards impaled themselves deeper in Itachi's body, widening the entrance and exit wounds.

Sakura worked as fast as she could; prodding the human body was a subtle art, and not given to immediate results. Gradually, Kimimaro began to pant, and his eyes widened as some sort of primal alarm system began to shriek from somewhere inside of him. Then, everything happened at once: his face fell, his skin grew clammy, the unnatural modifications from the curse seal retracted. He collapsed to the floor, bringing Itachi down with him and pinning Sakura underneath. Sakura reached farther; one glowing hand to the throat, and a blade of chakra sliced Kimimaro's jugular. He clawed at the floor, landed one final hit that knocked Sakura silly, and died drowning in his own blood.

A pounding headache darkened Sakura's vision. But there was no time for personal assessment; she fell upon Itachi and cut the shirt from his body with a chakra scalpel in one hand, downing two doses of combat stimulants with the other. Chakra flooded her system, and Sakura went into trauma care mode. After the first chakra scan, she nearly collapsed in relief: the lucky bastard still had all his organs intact. Nothing major had been punctured.

The two bigger issues were blood loss—Sakura staunching most of it with chakra, and the rest with bandages and scraps of cloth from the shirt—and the fact that Kimimaro's bones had not done the polite thing and seen themselves out of Itachi's body. Kimimaro remained in death as he had been in life: curiously inside out, half-in and half-out of curse seal transformation. No matter what she tried, Sakura could neither break nor shift the bones without potentially causing more damage. Throughout the process, Itachi lay still and quiet—his skin was clammy with sweat, his breathing was labored, but there were no groans of pain or pleas to end it. Instead, he watched her work.

Before the massacre, Itachi could count on both hands the number of people who'd regularly put their hands on his body out of affection. There'd been his parents, Sasuke, and a few aunts and uncles. The Uchiha Clan loved passionately, but had never been particularly touchy. Being chunked into a neighboring timeline meant he could re-add the Uchiha family members to the list.

Under the influence of heavy blood loss and the painkiller Sakura dosed him with, Itachi also added Sakura herself: if she was not affectionate, then why did she remain at his side, patching his wounds, mopping up his blood? This was what *true* friendship looked like.

"He knew about us." Orochimaru, Itachi meant. It needed to be said. Before anything else, it needed to be said.

"I know."

"Who else has he told?"

"I don't *know*, Itachi. We can't do anything about it right now. Be still."

He stilled.

"This is...a lot for me, even with the stimulants," Sakura said. Her voice reverberated strangely in his ear. "I don't want to take these out without a team. If something gets nicked and my hands aren't free,

there's a good chance you could bleed out. I'm going to send Echo for help."

"That's fine," Itachi replied in a tone best suited for remarking on the weather. Everything was...fuzzy. "What will you do with the documents?"

Sakura's eyes grew vacant, and Itachi knew she'd forgotten the documents entirely. Distracted by his injuries, no doubt. Really, she shouldn't bother. What if he *did* die? The documents would still be there, even if he wouldn't. But even as he chided her in the privacy of his head, he knew he'd have done the same thing. When someone you cared about was hurt—

"I'll deal with it when I'm done stabilizing you. What the *hell*, Itachi."

"He would've killed you."

Sakura wiped her forehead with the back of one hand. A trail of blood—his blood—left wet tracks across her face.

"He almost killed *you*. He still could; the dead bastard's still got his creepy bones in you."

What bones? The painkillers had done their job well; pressure remained, but pain was entirely absent. Itachi's thoughts floated free from their tethers, drifting along with the wind, and he felt an unfamiliar urge to be *chatty*. This was why he'd sworn off most painkillers in the other world. Nothing good came of being high.

"You were right, Sakura."

Sakura didn't look up from her work. "What are you talking about? Not coming here, surely."

"We were being too careful."

"Are you joking? You're impaled, and you're joking."

"Not—" Itachi coughed, sending Sakura into scolding, swearing tizzy. "I mean, if we hadn't come here, it's likely all of this information would have been lost forever. Our knowledge of things to come is deep, but circumstantial. We don't know the extent of what's different. These documents could change everything."

"So what, we find more bases to almost die in?" Sakura's chakra cooled his body from the inside out; the other medic-nin Itachi had encountered were never this precise: their chakra poked and prodded, where Sakura's flowed over his body like a soothing tide.

"With better preparation and less almost-dying, yes."

Sakura's eyes closed. She worked. "I don't even know how many times I threw myself into a mess without thinking. Maybe I can't be any other way. Maybe that's just our lot in life. "

"Dying?"

"Almost dying. Maybe we're meant to get hurt, and bleed, and suffer, so that other people won't have to. Doesn't it feel like that's what we're doing?"

At one point in his life, Itachi would have agreed wholeheartedly. He'd lived most of his existence that way: almost dying. For Sasuke's sake. For Konoha's sake. For the world's sake. Not anymore. Itachi didn't think he'd ever be rid of his desire to shield others, and he didn't want to; but that didn't mean he had to devalue his own life in the process. Normally, he would have kept such revelations to himself. But poppy resin was one hell of a drug, and so he told Sakura everything.

"No," he said. "I don't think it has to be that way. Perhaps we both thrive in violence. Perhaps we've become used to shielding others as the default. And perhaps people expect that of us: to sacrifice, over and over, so that they might bleed a little less. But that doesn't mean we deserve our pain. I lived my life by that code, once. I don't recommend it."

Sakura withdrew her hands, and let out a hoarse laugh. Sitting back on her heels, she rested. Her eyes were dry, but her hands shook. And she pulled the hair out of Itachi's face: a small gesture, one of simple comfort and not necessity. It puzzled Itachi; he didn't *need* to have the hair pulled from his eyes; it did not staunch the blood, or heal his wounds. But Sakura had afforded him this small gesture without even thinking, as though Itachi were a friend. As though she did not feel the need to keep score. And that meant everything in the world to someone unaccustomed to any manner of kindness, least of all the absentminded sort. A warmth settled heavy in Itachi's heart, and then migrated upward, finding refuge in his face, and then in his eyes. There came a slight sharpening of his vision, and a rush of power like a second high. It was so sudden, and out of place considering his present circumstances, that he had no idea where to begin parsing it. Until, with disbelief born out of pessimism, he realized what must have happened.

"You know, Itachi, I—wait." Sakura tilted her head, and peered into his eyes. Dust motes whirled furiously in the air as she moved back and forth, examining his face from different angles. "That's not right —" She extended a pointer finger, prodding the air in tiny increments

as she counted. “One, two, three...four. Itachi...your Sharingan. It changed.”

The mirror Itachi looked into came from Sakura’s pouch, and sat in her hand. Trembling from blood loss, heavy drugs, and fatigue, Itachi required assistance to confirm the things he already knew. A Sharingan for a kiss. And now, a tomoe for a simple touch; or maybe it was more than that—not just the touch, but the affection behind it, and the way he hadn't considered himself undeserving. Sakura held his head steady so that he could get a look.

Two Sharingan. Four tomoe. Nothing less.

She left Itachi’s side twice: first, to send Echo back to Konoha with a message, and second, to rummage through the library before reinforcements arrived. The latter errand had been at Itachi’s insistence, as Sakura had been reluctant to leave him alone even after she’d stopped the bleeding. They’d come this far, Itachi said. Why back down now just because he’d been turned into a kebab? Would checking the library remove the bones? No, but neither would anything else she did until reinforcements arrived.

So away she went, though she made a point to leave the door open and poke her head out every minute or so to check on him. In the end, she made off with only the most crucial of items: the detailed bingo book on the Akatsuki, the Sharingan research, and the book of curse seals. Then, they waited. They didn’t have to wait long. Echo returned, leading three teams of Konoha nin and one combat medic squad right to her and Itachi. The medics immediately swarmed Itachi, muttering amongst themselves about the best way to extract the bones safely without risking further damage. Itachi, his words slurred by the morphine, gave his professional opinion that the best course of action involved removing the bones post haste to let him walk it off. One of the medics gave him an affectionate pat on the head and told him everything would be all right.

Sakura clapped a hand to her mouth to keep the giggles at bay. Though her most recent deathmatch hadn't ended with a concussion, the rush of relief at the end, and subsequent giddiness, was no less intense. She was covered in Itachi's blood, hiding stolen documents, mentally and physically exhausted. Reality was creeping up on her, asking too many questions that she had no answers for—what was their next move? What about Orochimaru? The Akatsuki? Had anyone checked if Danzo and Root were still around? What were *they* up to? Would she and Itachi get arrested? Variable after variable came down on her like a hailstorm—each little bit of knowledge cascaded down in an avalanche of ice and rain: more information than she could ever hope to keep track of.

What the fuck did she and Itachi think they were doing here? They were just two people—two disempowered people—trying to take on a legion of titans based on information half-relevant at best. There were too many players on the field, too many cooks in the kitchen, and not nearly enough time to account for them.

“Sakura.” A mop of silvery-gray hair emerged from around a far corner; a gray eye followed, and then the rest of Kakashi-sensei. Sakura jumped to her feet and ran to the man, impulsively throwing her arms around him in a hug, which he returned awkwardly. Perhaps there was no avoiding a harsh punishment, but she could at least establish some sort of alibi.

“We’re sorry, Kakashi-sensei. We saw some Oto-nin running in this direction and went after them. It was my idea. I know it was stupid.”

Kakashi gave a dry chuckle, and rested a hand flat on the top of her head, the way Other Kakashi had always done.

“I’m inclined to agree.” His watchful eye found Itachi in the middle of a buzz of activity. With a hand signal, he sent one of the teams into

the library, and the other two into adjoining rooms with seals still intact. “Sakura...”

Something deadly serious crouched in Kakashi’s eyes. Sakura could see it creeping up on her like a predator—another hunter, making its way towards her with unhurried steps. And there she was, powerless to stop it. Another hailstone. And another. And another. But there was nothing *big* to worry about, was there? She had come here from the future. She was ready for anything. Even if a few things changed, wouldn’t most things remain similar enough to be predictable?

“Orochimaru is dead, Sakura. You won’t have to worry about him going after you anymore.”

Silence screamed in Sakura’s ears—they, along with the rest of her body, had gone numb and cold. The giddy hysteria that had kept her upright in the wake of Kimimaro’s demise began leaving her body—first there was a trickle, and then a deluge. Kakashi moved his hand from her head to her upper arm to keep her steady.

“What?” Whose voice was that, all thin and reedy and so, so weak? Not hers, surely.

“The Fourth and the Third sealed his chakra away, and then executed him when he refused to be taken in. Considering his research, it may take us a while to be totally certain, but things have already begun falling apart for Suna and Oto. The invasion is over. It’s time for you two to come home.”

Whose home?

Itachi couldn't help but feel sorry for Minato Namikaze. The man had probably woken up that morning hoping for an uneventful day or, barring that, a predictable one. It wasn't likely he'd expected to enter his office at the tail end of a failed invasion to find the most bizarre combination of human beings and former human beings Konoha had ever seen: Itachi in a stretcher surrounded by medics; Sakura shaking like a leaf, supported by Tenzo as she wolfed down a shoyu ramen, extra large; Kakashi standing next to Sasuke like a proud dad; Fugaku standing next to Sasuke like a proud dad having a breakdown; Sasuke himself, a little green in the face after stealing a peek at Itachi's "new holes"; Mikoto, comparing sword sizes with a random ANBU operative; Sakura's parents, huddled in a corner crying; Shikaku, embroiled in hushed conversation with Ibiki; Kushina, holding hands with Gaara of the Sand as he stared worshipfully up at her; Naruto, slapping Gaara's gourd to see if it would "do something"; Gaara's siblings and teacher, all of them shell-shocked; two shrouded bodies on the floor: one Kimimaro's, the other Orochimaru's.

One hardly knew where to begin: the prisoners of war, awaiting their fates? The four worried parents, caught between child and state? The allied jinchuriki? The vanguard, executed in a lonely bunker? Or his toppled king?

"All right." Minato clasped his hands in front of him: praying, begging, or both. "We're going to work through this one thing at a time." Kushina raised a hand. "Yes?"

"I think this one can wait until later." Kushina gave Gaara's chest a friendly pat. The three Suna shinobi flinched, and flinched again when Gaara did nothing but blink in confusion in response to the physical contact. "Me and Gaara had a good talk, and I think what he needs right now is some food. Come on," she waved a hand at Gaara's entourage, "We'll all go."

This might as well happen, Minato's face said. "Right. You handle that." He ordered an ANBU escort with a deft series of hand signs. Kushina and Friends (plus Naruto) left the office two parts exuberant and four parts stunned silence. Minato turned back to face Sakura and Itachi.

Everything is fine and good, his face said. *I am calm*. It was the most unsettling thing Itachi had ever seen, and he had seen some Unsettling Things.

Sakura ducked her head, and pushed forward with a preemptive apology. "We're sorry."

Minato held up his index finger. "First things first." Minato made eye contact with each of them in turn: Itachi, then Sakura, then Sasuke. "Sasuke, I am promoting you to chuunin. Congratulations."

Sakura took a step back. Sasuke glanced at Itachi, his face questioning. Itachi, kept mostly immobile by the trauma team and still a bit high, raised his eyebrows.

"Sasuke, your conduct during the invasion represented the skills of a chuunin: several shinobi reported to me of your leadership, initiative, and courage. In the middle of chaos, you organized teams, identified threats, and assisted our combat medics in triage. But you also actively avoided situations that might put you in unnecessary danger. Knowing one's strengths and limitations is critical for a good leader. Do you accept?"

"I do." Sasuke's dark eyes glittered. He accepted the flak jacket from Minato's outstretched hands, and pulled it on. Mikoto dabbed at her eyes with a tissue.

"I'm told you've been considering a career in combat medicine. I took the liberty of setting up an apprenticeship for you at the hospital. Report to the information desk tomorrow morning, and your medic-nin sensei will pick you up from there."

Sasuke's eyes opened wide. He looked around, as though expecting

the dream to end at any moment. At Minato's dismissal, he left the room with barely a salute, followed by Fugaku, Mikoto, and Kakashi. Another signal dismissed most of the medical team save for the lone medic-nin among them. A door at the bottom of the spiral staircase opened and shut with an echoing *bang* before Minato addressed Sakura and Itachi.

"You two."

Sakura gulped, reached for Itachi's wrist, and held on tight. He wondered if she even knew she was doing it.

"Our laws regarding your conduct are clear. In any other scenario, I'd be discharging you both at the very least, fining you for certain, and perhaps sentencing you to jail time. However, it has been suggested that I take a closer look at the circumstances relating to your behavior. While it is true that your actions were irresponsible, foolhardy, and bordering on treason, it is equally true that the two of you demonstrated exceptionally high levels of skill in terms of reconnaissance, combat, and preserving vital information. Therefore, my sentencing is as follows: you and Itachi both will be taken in for questioning, and released after Ibiki clears you for a six-month probation, during which you will not be allowed to leave the village for any reason. You will also be required to check in with Ibiki's staff daily. At the end of six months, with Ibiki's approval, you will be allowed outside the village with written permission from myself or Shikaku."

Sakura's grip, already strong, became crushing. The skin around her eyes was pulled taught, and she'd worried her lip until it bled, but she didn't look devastated. Truly, it was generous of the Fourth not to strip them of what little rank they had and lock them up; had Itachi been in the man's place, he'd most likely have followed regulations by the book. Still, he saw the wisdom in the Fourth's leniency; Itachi and Sakura had both displayed incredible skill, possible treason aside. There was far more to gain from courting their loyalty than angering them; that Itachi and Sakura also belonged to influential families only sweetened the deal; in addition to Itachi and Sakura's independent

gratefulness, their families were now implicitly indebted to the Hokage.

Minato continued: “At the nine-month mark, pending final approval, you will each begin an exclusive, long-term apprenticeship with an instructor capable of nurturing your unique specializations. In accordance with agreed-upon standards set by myself, my advisors, and each of your instructors, this training period will last three years. At the end of this session, your skills will be reevaluated and decisions will be made accordingly. Sakura.”

Sakura snapped into attention.

“Your instructor will, naturally, be Yamato. The biggest change is that rather than splitting your attention between specialty training and working with your original team, your primary focus will now be developing your mokuton. Much of this training will occur outside the village for two reasons: one, Yamato has recommended that exposure to diverse plant life and human culture will improve your ability to use the mokuton; second, after Kabuto’s attack, it has been made abundantly clear that confining you to the village long-term will not guarantee your safety. Do you accept?”

“I do. Thank you, sir.” Sakura bowed.

“Excellent. And you. Itachi.” Minato stood, clasped his hands behind his back, and approached the cot. “Your circumstances are about to change dramatically. While I question your sense of self-preservation, you have demonstrated traits that put you on a path to becoming truly great. Your willingness to sacrifice personal safety in order to protect others, and your flexibility in battle as described by those around you, assured not only your success in preserving critical documents, but the continued survival of one of only two mokuton users, as well as the death of a high-ranking adversary. With dedicated training, and a much-needed adjustment in priorities, you could become one of our best field agents. I considered many candidates for your mentor, but

in the end, there was only one best option.”

“You mean one option, period. Not my fault the others skipped town after a little light intimidation. They sure as hell don’t make jounin like they used to.” Jiraiya the Toad Sage clambered into the Hokage’s office from an open window. He leaned up against the desk, and gave Itachi an appraising look. “Name’s Jiraiya the Toad Sage: wooer of women, acquirer of information, reigning sake bomb champion and six-time bestselling author. Looks like you and I are gonna spend some quality time together, kid.”

Chapter End Notes

And THAT is the end of arc one.



Kabuto and Orochimaru both gone...there are much, much bigger fish in this pond, hiding down in the deep where no one sees.

Re: Itachi’s Sharingan developing, if you’re confused why I had it develop right after a fight instead of leaning hard into the Good Things Only route like Obito got, consider the context. His Sharingan didn’t develop during the fight, but after it, when he (1) realized that he doesn’t HAVE to hurt as the natural order of things and (2) accepted Sakura’s affection without thinking how much he didn’t deserve it. But he will get his moments of pure love and bliss. The second tomoe will be acquired through significantly more pleasant catharsis. Itachi has three big things to work through (1) his shitty opinion of himself, (2) accepting the tragedy of his past, and the role he played, and (3) allowing

himself to become a new person, forging his own destiny.

When I first drafted and wrote this, my memories told me that Kimimaro was a stoic but generally well-intentioned person (I think him letting Lee take the medicine put that in my head), but after going back and reading/watching his canon appearances I must conclude that he is an absolute dickhead. He told one of his teammates that he wanted to murder her in cold blood because she was so weak and therefore a waste of space.

1. who else in this chapter needs to touch grass
2. IS that how atonement works?
3. Mikoto is a sword-wielding badass MILF. Like to charge, reblog to cast

Why is this still important

Chapter Summary

In this chapter Sasuke finds a cool bug in the Haruno family gardens but he doesn't show it to Sakura or Itachi so the only reason you know is because I'm telling you right now

Chapter Notes

Thank you for your patience! Wyfe had a very busy month. This is a slower-paced transitional chapter to show Itachi and Sakura's friendship developing before they go adventuring (and mystery-solving??).

Why am I going through the trouble of taking away Itachi and Sakura's powers and making them start from scratch? For funsies? For a more interesting plot? Yes, a little. But mainly: because in order to transform the world, people have to transform themselves. Itachi and Sakura both have a lot of personal baggage, but their current struggles are also emblematic of a system that is corrupt all the way down. People want to save the world, but their goal is to get things back the way they were, not to adapt to the inevitable changes that come along with world-saving. But there is no returning to the old ways. If a world needs saving in the first place, change is necessary. So your options are: force things back to a "normal" that never was, thereby submitting yourself (and humanity) to a recurring cycle that inevitably ends in chaos and destruction before starting all over again; or work towards changing the world, permanently, for the better.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Do you think they're really dead?"

That was her first question. No, 'Now what?' or 'Why did our two biggest immediate threats die within weeks of one another? A bit *too* coincidental, don't you think?" Or perhaps 'Hello,' even.

But Itachi could not begrudge Sakura for the lack of niceties. She'd get around to them eventually. Sakura often began conversations as though she'd jumped right in the middle of them, impatient to get to the root of things. Smaller questions came later. Sometimes, there was simply no room for a buildup. One did not, upon assessing an injured patient, ask first for their name, and then if they'd had a good day. Instead, 'Where does it hurt?' Where, indeed.

"I don't know," Itachi answered honestly. "My father allowed me to read the final reports from the medical examiner's office. Multiple samples were taken from the bodies and DNA tested. Every single one positively identified the bodies as Kabuto and Orochimaru. Not only that, but Oto's military and government collapsed shortly after the invasion, indicative of upheaval among their leadership."

Sakura picked at the tablecloth. Today, she'd met Itachi at the cafe from before that had, somewhere along the way, become *their* cafe.

"Guess they could be clones." Sakura pickled a hole clean through the cheap paper covering the table, flushed, and covered up the evidence of her crime with a plate of strawberry mochi. "Orochimaru experimented with cloning, I know that much. Genetic clones, I mean. Not the bunshin technique."

"I suppose that's possible." Itachi followed the clouds as their reflections trudged across the surface of his tea. "But given the political chaos, it's unlikely. Orochimaru is cunning, but part of that cunning lies in understanding that talent and intellect alone are not enough to consolidate power. To be truly powerful, he needs money, directly or indirectly. Oto provided financial stability. It's true he might have moved elsewhere, but the timing of it makes no sense."

A butterfly landed on Sakura's forehead. She observed it, cross-eyed, until it flew away. Ripples of tea hit the edges of her teacup as she

tapped the ceramic with her fingernail. *Tap, tap, tap.*

“We were lucky, Itachi. Or we have one hell of a guardian angel. I’ve been—” Sakura hesitated. “Do you feel like there *is* someone doing all of this? I couldn’t stop thinking about everything: the way we keep getting out of messes, sometimes before they even start. After Zet—after *he* attacked us, things have been going well, even when what we’re doing is stupid or dangerous. Orochimaru dying can’t be a coincidence. And those seals at the hideout...who broke them?”

“Our luck does seem to be unusually high, at times.” A guardian angel? Perhaps something less celestial, but Itachi had nevertheless begun to suspect the same as Sakura. That feeling of wrong-ness that had prickled him at the hideout hadn’t left him entirely. There were eyes on Itachi’s back; though, whether they belonged to some mysterious benefactor, a suspicious ANBU, or some other person, Itachi wasn’t sure.

Sakura, who’d gone subdued during Itachi’s long silence, frowned. “This could have gone so much worse, and looking back on it, I don’t know why it didn’t—not just the invasion, but everything before that, too. We’ve been careless. I still think we should be more aggressive overall, but we need to be honest about what we can handle. We keep overreaching like this, next time we might find ourselves falling out the window.”

“That’s reasonable.” Of course, he didn’t *want* to admit his own weaknesses. Itachi had never matched the likes of Kimimaro in terms of egotism. But he’d been used to his power—comfortable in it—and there were still parts of him that subconsciously reached for resources that were no longer there.

Sakura shook her head. “It doesn’t feel real. If Orochimaru is dead, that changes so much. I know I should be more worried about it, but I still feel so unattached to—” She cut herself off, and her eyes darted away from his face, fleeing to safety in the vase of flowers in the

center of the table. An explanation for her behavior was not forthcoming, and Itachi knew better than to insist on one. Sakura changed the subject.

“I have an idea.” The tablecloth acquired a second hole. Sakura covered up that one with her teacup. “It’s kind of...well, it’s really boring, but when you mentioned money, I had a thought. So, we can’t power our way through right now. But maybe we can try sabotage—financial sabotage. During this time in the Other Place, Pain’s primary goal was to amass money and power. The Akat-you-know-who did that by accepting missions far below the standard asking price. So more and more missions go to Them, and people start expecting lower prices that the larger nations can’t afford, and suddenly everyone is hemorrhaging money.”

Itachi couldn’t suppress a blink of surprise. “That’s quite privileged information. What was your clearance level? I know you apprenticed with the Fifth, but weren’t you a chuunin?”

A light dusting of pink appeared high on Sakura’s cheeks. “My clearance level fluctuated...correlating with the amount of alcohol in the Hokage’s system.”

“Ah.”

“Anyway.” Sakura cleared her throat. “Here’s my idea. I guess my grandmother has been wanting to get me interested in commerce. Her end goal is to permanently establish a Honey-connected emissary within Konoha to better facilitate trade. That’s probably a big reason why she pushed for this engagement. Marrying into a respected local clan with a firm tie to the land would help alleviate concerns that Honey doesn’t keep Konoha’s interests in mind.”

A sensible explanation. Itachi nodded again. “Then what’s the idea?”

“We undercut Pain by taking advantage of a subsidy system. What if I proposed a plan where the Uchiha Clan takes on jobs at an even lower cost, subsidized by Honey?”

Interesting. “Just the Uchiha?”

“Right. If it’s just Honey and the Uchiha, that makes it personal. It’ll be easy to explain away as a business initiative to bring our families closer together. The Land of Honey is already known to specialize in subterfuge and espionage. Even their shinobi trend that way: lots of seduction missions, blackmail, professional courtesans, that sort of thing. If they tank Ame’s economy and play their cards right, they’ll come out of this making money.”

“I see.”

“Like I said: boring. But we need time to train and think about our next big move, and this could set Pain back for years.” Sakura ate another mochi, and finished off her tea. Itachi refilled her cup, highly impressed by her reasoning. As a plan, it wasn’t nearly fleshed out enough, but it was a solid idea on a solid foundation. “Speaking of which, when are you leaving?”

Too soon. “Seven months.”

Sakura snickered at him. “Are you excited to go globetrotting with Jiraiya the Toad Sage?”

Itachi just gave her a Look, which made her laugh outright.

“You’d better send me letters with Echo. I expect photographs, also. Don’t think I didn’t notice that shit you pulled at the chuunin exams. I *will* get those pictures of Lee back.”

She could try. “Is your teacher taking you on a training mission of your own?” Itachi hoped so. Who knew what sort of fighter this Sakura might become with a master mokuton instructor’s touch?

“Tenzo said it’ll be a mix,” Sakura said. “Sometimes we’ll be here and I’ll train, maybe do a mission or two with a mixed team. I’m also planning on getting back into medical ninjutsu—seeing if it’s different now, researching ways to use the mokuton for healing, that sort of thing. Most of the time we’ll be outside Konoha working on the mokuton, though. It’s like the Fourth said: there’s a huge target on my back, and a certain amount of moving me around will be safest. Our schedule won’t be predictable, *and* there will be a full squad of ANBU tailing us everywhere we go. Kind of creepy.”

“If they’re doing their jobs properly, you won’t notice them,” Itachi pointed out.

“And now it’s even creepier,” Sakura sighed. “Thanks. Anyway, Tenzo said we’ll leave in a few months. Whatever ‘a few’ means. He wants me to get acquainted with plants in other climates. And study up on earth sciences. Itachi, did you know there are people who write entire textbooks exclusively on dirt? Sorry, ‘soil.’ They’re touchy about that. The botanists.”

“Then I suppose we might see less of one another in the near future.”

It was true. But, rather than brighten, Sakura appeared to shrink a little—and then, realizing her reaction was not what it *should* be, she straightened her posture and took on an air of forced detachment. A funny sort of feeling sprouted deep within Itachi’s chest. He glanced

down at the dango. Too much at once? Heartburn?

“Anyway. I’m going to focus on Him in terms of finding things out. I’m sure we’ll come across one of the lighter-colored Hims out there, and maybe me and Tenzo can figure out better ways of killing them, or sabotage how they communicate...? Plant stuff. I’ll let you know. I figured you’ll probably focus on your eyes in addition to doing sneaky shit with Jiraiya, right? Presumably, he’ll be focused on the you-know-who by default.”

“Likely.”

“Good.” Then it was Sakura’s turn to nod—a single, sharp bob of the head, that said, ‘Meeting adjourned.’ But then she lingered, and inquired about Itachi’s injury, and then she spoke of the errands she’d run earlier that day, and before Itachi knew it, a full hour had passed. He took the long way to the Uchiha’s dedicated training grounds, unable to keep himself from sliding into introspection. This time, though, his thoughts turned not to morbidity, but friendship. Was that what Sakura was becoming to him? A friend? She certainly acted like it—yes, there was still some antagonism on her end, but at this point, Itachi understood the majority of her pointed remarks were teasing and probably healthy for him to experience.

He wondered, idly, if she’d thought at all about the massacre since the night he’d brought it up, piecing together what she now knew in an attempt to set the record straight in her mind. Now, it seemed, the opacity satisfied her. Perhaps what she’d wanted all along was justification for her rage, and not the truth. It certainly wouldn’t be the first time Itachi had encountered such a view. But this one was personal, and it rankled him. Perhaps some time apart would do them both some good. A couple years was more than enough time to grow and change. Who knew what people they would be at the end of it?

Green had a smell. For Sakura, green smelled like wet earth after a rain; a leaf torn in two, bleeding; a field of dry wheat; new bark; and the papery skin of a birch tree. Green had a taste, too: the last drop of honeysuckle, hovering between floral and earthy. Green felt crisp like palm fronds, soft like lamb's ear, delicate as tissue paper, hard as iron.

Sakura sat on a stump in the Aburame Forest, sketching. She'd been there for nearly an hour, putting the finishing touches on an agathis cone cross section, when the tips of Tenzo's boots came into view through the curtain of her hair.

"Good morning, sensei."

"Good morning, Sakura. It's sapling day."

And so it was. Tenzo led her deeper into the forest, an indulgent smile on his face, until they came to the base of a massive oak. He pointed to a nearby root with the back of one hand; thick and gnarled, its widest point twisted over their heads higher than Sakura could jump without the aid of chakra.

"We'll start here, and focus on growing a sapling from adult source material. This isn't the same as waking seeds up. With seeds, you're helping a natural process get started. Using existing growth to create more material actually requires less energy, but the end result is as strong as the source. In other words, if you tap into an older tree's life energy, the wood you make will be tough and strong, just like that old tree. Whereas with a seed, though you enjoy greater flexibility because you control its growth from the very start, the strength and scale of it is entirely dependent on your energy output."

"If it's less hard, why didn't we start with that?"

“Because it isn’t. In terms of pure chakra output, this technique requires less from you. But old trees didn’t become old through capitulation.” Tenzo gave the root an affectionate pat. “This tree is stuck in a biological rut. It’s at least two centuries old, and in human terms, it’s set for life. Why would it let *you* tell it what to do?”

“Oh. So it’s stubborn.”

“You have to work for it. Think about it metaphorically, if it helps. You want it to do something, so you have to make *your* wants make sense for the tree. Of course, you could brute force your way through it. But then you’re battling on two fronts: against your own reserves, but also against the will of the tree.”

Sakura placed her hands on the root and felt for its energy. It was easier and easier every day to touch upon that energy, but so far she’d never tried to convince anything but the seeds to actually listen.

“I’m not great at convincing people of things,” Sakura admitted. “I’m more likely to barrel ahead or be sneaky to get what I want, to be honest.”

“No wonder you started with vines.” Tenzo grinned at her. “They don’t bother much with convincing, either. So this might take you a while. If you get frustrated, take a break. But then we’re jumping right back in.”

Sakura took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and attempted to convince a tree several times her age to produce one single, solitary twig. By the end of the day, she’d produced nothing but one hell of a headache; nonetheless, Tenzo told her she should leave the forest with her head held high. Learning was all about challenging oneself to shift perspectives, he said. If the tree didn’t want to listen to her, what else could she try?

Two weeks, no twig. Not even a bump. She'd been so discouraged that Tenzo pushed ahead with her vine training—vines were far more reasonable, he soothed her, as well as open to suggestion. She'd even started creating vines from her own body, the way Tenzo could, and she had grand schemes to imbue them with poisonous spikes. If she managed to figure out how to craft *specific* poisons, then she'd be in business.

Three weeks, no twig. But two days later, she finally figured it out. All that time, she'd been going into the task expecting to butt heads with the tree. And she had—because she'd only been thinking of her own goals, and not respecting the concerns of the tree. So instead of shouting at it, she listened. That was how she found out about the Armillaria root rot. For the remainder of the fourth week, she and Tenzo medicated the tree with the mokuton and supplies from the Yamanakas until the fungus was eradicated.

The tree gave her *two* twigs at the end of that week, each full of verdant, healthy leaves. Its life energy filled Sakura's chest with a comforting warmth—the same sensation she'd felt the day her mokuton woke up and one that she'd dearly missed. And she didn't feel a bit tired. *Consider other paths forward*, she wrote in her journal that night, *when the one you've chosen leads to a dead end. Cooperation may provide quicker results than force.*

Afterward, she lay in bed unable to sleep for all the thoughts swirling in her head. Tenzo told her time and time again how a mokuton master knew how to apply adaptability in all faces of their life, not just in combat. It wasn't enough to don flexibility for the duration of a battle; Sakura needed to *become* flexible.

Easier said than done. While Sakura had made great strides learning to adapt in most areas of life, there was an enormous area of neglect in her adaptability training: an area with the exact shape and dimensions of Itachi Uchiha. They'd warmed up to one another bit by bit, but his past continued to haunt her. Had he actually been the one

to kill his entire clan? If he hadn't done it, then why had he been framed? Had he been forced? Or had he truly annihilated his clan purely to test his mettle?

The latter explanation no longer matched up with the man Sakura now knew, but her speculation was just that—mere speculation. She wanted to know. She was terrified to know. If what she now knew was a lie, would the truth hurt her more? Their current status quo dissatisfied her morbid curiosity, but in all other aspects, they cooperated relatively well. Would it do to ruin that peace for a little satisfaction?

The ceiling did not have an answer for her. Neither did the walls, or her pillow, or the owl snoozing outside her window. She spent the rest of the night tossing and turning, chasing down dreams that would not come.

Itachi's mother wasn't merely good with a sword. She was one of the best sword fighters the Uchiha Clan had to offer. And since the Uchiha Clan were nearly unmatched in their mastery of weapons, that meant Mikoto was one of the best sword fighters on the continent. Her skills had waned some during Itachi and Sasuke's childhood, since, like her husband, she'd lost pleasure in the martial arts. But with Itachi and Sasuke's maturity and commitment to becoming shinobi, she'd retaken her throne with a vengeance. Every other day, Itachi woke up, ate breakfast, and set off for the Uchiha fencing grounds to duel his mother.

Inevitably, she'd be there waiting for him, fully armored and ready to spar, even though most times he left the house before her. He appreciated her going the extra mile: even physical fighting involved some manner of psychological warfare. But it was more than just that: with the benefit of a mind seven years older than his body, Itachi appreciated his parents as individuals with lives that extended beyond their role as caregivers. He could see things that he hadn't noticed

before—and he understood far better the things he *had* noticed. His mother did not regret leaving her training behind to focus on raising her children, but brushing up on her skills clearly thrilled her; she smiled more often than she didn't, even while bearing down on her son with a blunt katana.

Fugaku was another story. Itachi knew his father loved him deeply; time as a fugitive taught Itachi how to read even the tiniest of tells, and the brick wall he'd considered his father to be at age thirteen fell away to reveal a person as complex as any other. But Fugaku wallowed in his regrets. Obito's death had inflicted upon him a trauma that had not lessened over the years. In the race of life, Mikoto pushed brutally forward despite her shortcomings and baggage. Fugaku hadn't. Nevertheless, he took the time to train with both of his sons, focusing entirely on the development of their Sharingan. The lessons were nearly identical to the ones Itachi remembered from his childhood, save for the slower pacing and his father's obsessive focus on their wellbeing. They made for an interesting pair, Itachi and his father. Both of them craved forgiveness from the other, while neither of them could truly give it.

After sessions, Itachi and Sasuke tended to loiter at the training grounds and talk, while their parents left to see to other business. At first, Itachi avoided his brother: despite the guilt, there was still a part of him that couldn't *not* see the other Sasuke, the one he'd disappointed and then ruined. But Itachi knew better, and so he convinced himself to stay until there came a day when he wanted to stay. Today, they saw to their swords; sharp ones were never used in training, but Mikoto had been harping on them both lately about proper cleaning.

"How's your hospital apprenticeship going, Sasuke?" Itachi applied choji oil to the cloth on his brother's behalf. Sasuke had a tendency to half-ass his cleaning.

"It's cool. I'm with a couple other students getting trained for the basic stuff. Haku-sensei is my instructor for basic training. After that, we'll go into specialties. The Fourth said he was going to send Lady

Tsunade a letter about my lightning chakra ideas, but he doesn't know if anything will happen."

"How are you getting along with the other students?"

"Okay, but I haven't made any close friends yet. They're all obsessed with Sakura's mokuton. It's driving our teacher crazy."

Itachi looked out onto the field: a rolling sea of grasses and wildflowers. Had Sakura started making her own flowers yet, or was she still working with seeds and sprouts? "The mokuton was rumored to promote healing in its users. People said the First could heal his body instantly, without the use of hand signs."

"Hakui says that's a myth, just like free time for medical students. The First was good, but no healing is instantaneous. And even sped-up healing processes have consequences. I have so much reading to do, and I'm not allowed to use my Sharingan because 'memorization doesn't equal skill development.' I don't see why I can't memorize now and figure it out later."

"I see."

Sasuke gave him a sideways look. "Sakura visited for a couple lessons. She's really good—picks things up like it's nothing. But she said Yamato won't let her incorporate the mokuton into her medical techniques until she's completely mastered the basics. Something about not turning even more people into trees, whatever that means."

"Mmm."

Sasuke tossed his cloth aside, despite the fact that he *clearly* had not oiled every last inch. Itachi sighed and held his hand out for Sasuke's training sword.

Sasuke smirked at him, and held the sword out to his brother hilt-first. "If you keep cleaning it for me, I'm never going to learn, Itachi."

"If you know you're doing it wrong, then do it right."

"But if I do it wrong, you'll fix it for me every time and that's easier."

"That's incredibly manipulative."

"Don't fix it, then."

Itachi looked at Sasuke. He looked at Sasuke's sword. He looked at Sasuke. Then he reached for the cloth Sasuke tossed aside, and finished the spots Sasuke had missed. Sasuke rolled around in the grass, cackling like a naughty crow.

"Itachi, you're such a softie. Sakura's going to boss you around for the rest of your life, and you're going to do everything she says, even the dumb stuff."

Probably. Almost certainly. Definitely. Itachi gave his brother a crooked smile. "Have you heard anything else about your betrothal requests?"

"No, and I honestly don't care all that much. Romance isn't really my

Thing, and I can get along with almost anybody. Hey, guess what.”

“What’s that?”

“Sakura’s coming to dinner tonight. I said you invited her, and that you cried all day yesterday because you missed her so much. She said it’s been a month since you hung out. You should be ashamed. I know mom is.”

Itachi dropped the sword. He hadn’t dropped a weapon of any sort in over a decade. “Sasuke, what—”

But there was no one to admonish but the wind. Sasuke had vanished into thin air, leaving only the faintest flickering image of a body behind. Itachi frowned, finished conditioning his brother’s sword, carefully packed it away, and made his way towards the taijutsu grounds farther south. Shisui was about to get the beating of his life.

“The food is lovely, Mikoto-san. Shirayaki eel is one of my favorite dishes.”

“So we heard, so we heard. Sasuke knows so much about you. Just like his older brother.” Mikoto pressed her lips together and gave her errant son a meaningful look—the old *You have brought shame upon this family* stare that Sakura’s mom gave her every time she sat with her knees wide apart on the couch, cramming fistfuls of popcorn in her mouth while watching trashy soap operas.

Sakura suppressed an unladylike snort. Itachi had been sitting across from her, donning the aura of a cornered rat for the duration of

dinner. By comparison, Sasuke practically glowed with happiness and good health. Sakura hadn't believed the crying story in the slightest, but that didn't mean it wasn't hilarious.

Accepting a proffered dish of potato croquettes with a smile, Sakura mercifully provided a distraction. Just because Itachi was a social hermit didn't mean he deserved nonstop torment. Occasional torment, specifically from her, was completely fine, though.

"Would you like to see what I've learned so far?"

Mikoto clapped her hands together. "Ooh, of course!"

The chrysanthemum bloom was always a huge hit. First, she placed a seed in her palm. Then, her chakra crept inside, barely a whisper of energy—just enough to wake the seed, nothing more. Once the chain reaction of life began, all Sakura had to do was feed it more energy until a stalk appeared, and then a bud. The finale was everyone's favorite part: an explosion of tiny petals that burst out from the center, seeking the sun. Mikoto took the flower in exchange for a heaping spoonful of praise; as it still had its roots attached, the whole plant wound up in a vase.

"Now, *that* was special. Wasn't it, Itachi? Sakura, we've really missed having you around. You ought to have dinner with us at least once a month. Don't you think so, Itachi?"

Itachi hesitated for a fraction of a second, and then nodded. Under the table, Sakura tapped him in the shin with her foot in exchange for a dead-eyed stare. Perhaps sensing impending doom, Fugaku spoke up for the first time that evening.

"Lady Satsuko told us about your idea to destabilize Ame through

undercutting mission costs.” His dark eyes were steady, but took on a spark of interest. “The Fourth is likely to support it. Ame has been a thorn in everyone’s side for years. First the Salamander, and now rumors of some upstart terrorist group taking over. It’ll improve political talks with Kiri, certainly. They’ve always locked horns with Ame. What sort of missions would you consider we take on? I’m interested to hear your thoughts.”

Just like Itachi: feast or famine with his words. Sakura grinned, and retrieved a journal from her pack four inches thick and bursting with paper inserts. It fell on the table with a dull *thud!*

“I never thought you’d ask! Fugaku-san, how much time do you have, exactly?”

Of course, the Harunos wanted Itachi over for dinner—and his parents and brother, too. Satsuko asked for two weeks’ preparation so she could break off from the caravan and properly stun the Uchihis with lavish, imported foodstuffs. This was, Sakura informed him, fairly typical of her people; Honey etiquette demanded a no-holds-barred policy in terms of hosting guests.

Tenzo occasionally made quick visits to the estate, Sakura said, and he always left with a belly full of rare teas and sumptuous snacks; recently, Tenzo started acquiring *opinions* about oolong—opinions informed by the many expensive cups of oolong he’d downed at the Harunos’ behest. The man had developed his own personal ranking system, based not merely on taste but also on the climate in which the leaves had been harvested.

Arrayed in light summer formal wear, Itachi followed his family to the Harunos’ main house, utterly unprepared for whatever he was about to face next. The Haruno estate, a modest four acres of mixed forest

and restored grassland, hadn't existed in the Konoha he grew up in, though he recognized its grounds as having been incorporated into the Aburame Clan by the time he was old enough to take notice of such things. Most likely, the family had been forced to sell it off for economic reasons after Honey's civil war, which in this world hadn't occurred. Debts or bribes to be paid, perhaps.

Mebuki gave him the full tour. She was a rather serious woman who reminded Itachi of the Uchiha elders who lived at the Naka Shrine and saw to the clan's spiritual affairs. Her husband Kizashi stood aside for the most part, happy to let her take the lead. As Itachi recalled, the man was a Konoha native. The Harunos, if they were like most noble families in the Honey region, observed a matriarchal-ish lineage; as a result, the older women tended to take point in family affairs. Though, as Sakura pointed out during the tour, at least four Haruno family heads in the last three centuries didn't consider themselves male *or* female, or if they did, it was anybody's guess which they were at any given moment.

After a six-course dinner, the family took to the gardens for a walk. Itachi and Sakura were allowed to walk together, but they were anything but alone. This date was properly and rigidly chaperoned. While they walked, he updated her on political affairs. Those affairs were, as Sakura had said, incredibly boring. But in the short time since the Fourth put his literal stamp of approval on the idea, heads were already rolling in Ame leadership.

"The Uchiha have already completed four missions intended for Ame," Itachi said. He slowed down to give Sakura time to hop over a puddle. "Your plan seems to be working, albeit slowly."

Sakura lifted her chin, the way she often did when feeling proud of herself. This time, Itachi thought, the pride was well deserved. At thirteen-going-on-fourteen, most children were far more interested in themselves than the intricacies of geopolitical tension. Properly, Sakura *wasn't* thirteen-going-on-fourteen—at the time of her death she'd been seventeen or eighteen, if he recalled the Other Sasuke's age correctly. Still.

Sakura faded somewhat the farther they walked into the gardens. In the butterfly house, she came to a stop completely and sat down on a wrought-iron bench.

“I feel bad for the citizens, don’t you?”

“Ame’s citizens?”

“Yes. They didn’t ask for this. They’re just the ones unlucky enough to live in a little nation caught in the middle of five bigger ones that never get along. The first three wars decimated them. But at least that was honest destruction. This is like a knife in the back. I’m not naive enough to think innocent people won’t die over this. I think it’ll make things better for this world in the long run, but...I don’t have to wonder what it’s like to be on the other side. I know what it’s like to get used as a means to an end.”

Itachi waited for Sakura to regret her openness and clam up, the way she’d done at the cafe after returning from the Forest of Death. But she surprised him. She put her chin in one hand, sighed, and asked him how he was doing. And, most surprising of all, he told her.

To Sakura’s frustration, her days of convincing plants to do things were not over. In fact, Tenzo informed her, they never would be. If she wanted to truly master the mokuton, she needed to think of her ability in cooperative terms; plants were her allies, not her rivals to upstage, not her enemies to overthrow. The mokuton gave her a voice in an ongoing conversation, not a crown of absolute authority. Fighting plants only ever ended with human surrender, human casualties, or both. Tenzo’s assigned reading drilled that warning deep inside her brain. She learned about agriculture gone wrong,

desertification, catastrophic introductions of invasive plants, erosion, and other natural disasters, all to prove the point that the stubbornness of plants was not an obstacle to overcome but an attitude to roll with.

“You don’t want to be like Cactus City in the Land of Wind,” Tenzo informed her during cool-down stretches.

“I’ve never heard of Cactus City in the Land of Wind.” Sakura blew a strand of hair out of her face. It was long enough now to handle a tiny ponytail and get on her nerves, but not long enough that she could twist it up with the pin.

“Exactly. Now, then.” Tenzo straightened in one smooth motion. Sakura attempted the same, and fell over when her leg cramped up. “I read in your peeking journal that you were interested in experimenting with pure nature chakra storage. Specifically, through a seal not unlike the one used by Lady Tsunade.”

The peeking journal: the one Tenzo was explicitly allowed to and encouraged to read. Because some things Sakura just didn’t want to admit aloud.

“Do you think it could work?”

“I think it has potential. Normally, I would say manipulating nature chakra outside our current training regimen is a hard pass at this stage, but storage seals are unique. Usually if they fail, the worst thing that’ll happen is you lose everything you stored up. But I did take the liberty of contacting a sealing master for you to discuss this with. *Discuss*, Sakura. I think the hypothesis is good, but no trying *anything* until we’re done with Mokuton Art Academy.”

Sakura wrinkled her nose. “Am I going to have to talk to Jiraiya?”

“Sakura, I would never do that to you.”

“Oh, thank god.”

“Kushina will be waiting for you next Thursday at noon in the back room of the cat cafe. Don’t be late, and *don’t* practice until she meets with you.”

“Sir.”

The day finally came when Tenzo decided Sakura deserved a vacation from her studies. Or, more accurately, it was decided for him; some sort of kerfuffle in the Land of Mountains required the attention of an ANBU operative, and Tenzo, apparently, was the man for the job. One week, he’d said, and extracted Sakura’s promise to avoid mokuton training entirely. The break would be good for her, he’d said, and maybe she could make some new friends, or have a sleepover.

Sakura saw her teacher off at the gates with a wave, and then made a beeline for the Uchiha training grounds. She found Itachi engaged in swordsmanship practice with Sasuke alongside other pairs of sparring Uchiha, and lounged beneath a tree until they’d finished their set. Her last attempt at joining a training session ended in scandal when she’d shown up with her standard issue tanto, because *apparently* people weren’t supposed to use “real swords” to practice sword fighting. Itachi had looked pained; Sasuke had just laughed at her; in the end, one of Itachi’s cousins—a young, curly-haired man—had taken it upon himself to explain. Weapons and Sharingan made up core components of the Uchiha Clan’s collective identity, he informed her. The average Uchiha learned how to hold a sword at age three; sometimes they

forgot that other people couldn't parry in their sleep.

Thankfully, Itachi wasn't of the mind to dismiss her entirely on the merits of an earlier failure. Not only did he make room for her in his current session, Itachi actually took the time to get behind her, his chest to her back, and guide her through a few basic moves until she had them down.

Still. It disturbed Sakura that she could know so little about something. Knowing stuff and things was everything to her; even if an opponent outmatched her in strength and speed, she always had cunning up her sleeves. That an entire martial art was lost on her was not to be borne. She wanted to ask Itachi what it was about swords that he found so intuitive—why the dance of flesh and bone and steel called to him and made a warrior greater than the sum of its parts.

But it was really fucking hot outside, and she was sweaty, and earlier she'd drank some strong tea on an empty stomach and had cramps, so what she actually said was, "I just don't get it."

Itachi tilted his head. *Don't get what?*

"Like..." Sakura gestured aimlessly in the air. "Swords. Why don't you just throw a rock at somebody really hard instead?"

Sasuke, also taking a break, choked on his water.

Sakura scoffed. "What? It's a legitimate question!"

The expression that crossed Itachi's face would not have been out of place on a person whose house had just burned down.

“A rock,” he said, his voice soft like a stalking cat. If he’d had a tail, it would’ve been swishing. “That’s completely ridiculous.”

“Okay, just—okay, look.” Sakura picked up a rock the size of her fist at the base of the tree, reared back, and sent it flying. Between mokuton sessions, she’d been taking it upon herself to rehash Tsunade’s chakra release techniques; though Sakura wanted to prioritize her new skillset in battle, being able to spontaneously generate canyons had its perks. The rock became a blur, crossed the meadow in a fraction of a second, and exploded a small tree at the perimeter of the field. Sasuke’s eyebrows disappeared into his bangs.

“You see?” Sakura barely held back from stamping her foot. It was a *legitimate question*. “If I did that with a sword, it’d just break. Rocks are free, and also everywhere. No maintenance. Why not rocks?”

Itachi now appeared ill.

“But what if you’re up close to someone?” Sasuke asked.

“Then throw the rock up close. I don’t know, Sasuke. It just seems weird to me to spend all this money and time on something that could be accomplished with rocks.”

“I mean, if you think about it, a sword is a domesticated rock.”

Sakura shrugged. “Yeah, I guess that’s true.”

Sasuke turned his head. “Hey, Itachi, what do you—oh. He’s gone.”

“We pissed him off?”

“Yeah, we pissed him off.”

“Fuck. What should I do?”

“Invite him to train with you and give him his very own rock so he doesn’t feel left out.”

“Note to self: never ask Sasuke for relationship advice.”

Kushina was an interesting collection of mannerisms—a study of just how many dissonant traits a single human being could cram into one body. Her makeup, outfit, and hair were flawless: a stylist’s dream with a swimsuit model’s body to match. She also slouched with her knees apart, licked food off of her fingertips, and cussed like a sailor when she drank. At half a head taller than her husband, Kushina stood out in any crowd; more often than not, she wore heels to stand out even more. Kushina, Sakura determined, was perfect.

Not only that, but she’d freely given Sakura her unofficial official stamp of approval for Operation: Put Nature Chakra in My Forehead and See What Happens.

“It might be a different shape than Lady Tsunade’s diamond,” Kushina said. “Don’t expect identical results. Also, I would wait until your seal sets before trying to use it, and definitely wait until Yamato is around.”

“Right. Thanks for your advice.”

“I’m happy to give it.”

Well, that was it, then. Conversation over. But just as Kushina stood up to say her goodbyes, Sakura blurted out the question that’d been kicking her in the ass every day for far longer than she wanted to admit.

“What should I do if I like someone who’s done a *lot* of bad things, but there might be another story behind the bad things, and I’m not sure if I want to ask because knowing could be a lot worse than *not* knowing, and the truth might make me question *everything*, and also because there’s actually no way to confirm what the truth actually *is* in the first place, so I’d have to take everything on faith, and even if the bad thing is way more complicated than it looks, there’s no way to go back and fix anything, and the person seems like a good person in most other ways, except for a normal amount of annoying personality flaws?”

Okay, so it was a series of highly confusing, vague, and interlocking questions. Fortunately, Kushina took the outburst in stride. As mother to Naruto and wife to the Hokage, Kushina had probably heard five weirder questions by the time she brushed her teeth that morning.

“Sakura.” Kushina poked her right between the eyes with a glossy, manicured nail. “Is this about Itachi?”

Sakura’s skin burst into flames. “I—fuck. Yeah. But this isn’t like—you don’t have to worry about—”

“I’m not. Listen.” Kushina took Sakura’s hands in hers, and held them safe and warm in the middle of the table. “I’ve been through a lot of things in my life, many of them horrible, that left me with more questions than answers.”

Kushina paused to finish off her tea.

“First,” she went on, “Good on you for wanting to ask someone a tough question. But the next thing you need to ask yourself is *why* you want to know the answer. Asking a really tough question could change your life, and his, forever—could be for the worse, could be for the better. And that’s just the asking part. Is it worth it?”

“I’m...not sure.”

“All right. I heard Yamato told you to keep journals; so take a couple pages, divide them in two sections labeled Pros and Cons and start asking yourself the even tougher questions. Ask yourself what problem you’re trying to solve. Is it really a problem in the first place? Is it a ‘what’ question or a ‘why’ question? What will you do if the answer challenges your opinions, depresses you, or makes you regret asking in the first place? And if it’s something you can never truly confirm, then do you trust Itachi enough to take his answer at face value?”

Sakura, ever the teacher’s pet, pulled out a notebook and penned down some of the questions, fully intending to meditate on them at home. “Got it.”

“People are complicated, Sakura. Very complicated. And that includes people you might label as ‘bad.’ Doesn’t mean you have to forgive their actions, but we do not live in a binary world of Good and Evil.”

Sakura rested her forehead against the window with a loud groan.

“I know.” Kushina patted her on the head. “But it really does depend.”

“I just want answers.”

“Do you?”

“I...don’t know. I don’t know.”

“Should I order more tea cakes?”

“Yes,” Sakura muttered into the double-pane glass.

“It sounds serious. I’m getting triple chocolate. You want quadruple chocolate?”

“Please.”

It was a C-level mission, they said. You’ll be home before dark, they said. Yet here Itachi was at the tail-end of what *should* have been B-rank at least, crammed into a booth at the back of a smoky pub with his team and no sign they’d skip town anytime soon. Also present: their contractor, their contractor’s ex-nemesis, and the opposing team hired by their contractor’s ex-nemesis.

The setup: a classic tale of tragic avarice gone too far—two men and

their dueling bakeries, both longing for the days of their youth in which they'd planned to open a bakery together, as friends. Separated by war and thinking the other man dead, they'd set up shop on opposite sides of the same town and, threatened by the mysterious rival bakery's existence, hired trained killers to end that faceless rivalry for good. Leave it to Naruto to rewrite the last chapter: as Itachi, Sakura, and Sasuke looked on in awe, Naruto put his godlike charisma to work; not only had he reintroduced the two men and mended their relationship, he'd also befriended the opposing team and offered to take everyone out to dinner on Konoha's dime—a pot set to boil over, brought to a productive simmer. And if the way the men were eyeing one another was any indication, those two bakeries would soon become a single franchise.

“Naruto's diplomatic skills must be innate,” Sakura said, somewhere between tipsy and drunk. “Nice to see some things are universal. It's too bad he's so busy most of the time or maybe I'd learn something. I'm still getting into daily arguments with blades of grass.”

Itachi made a sound of general agreement. He and Sakura sat squished together at the center of the booth, surrounded on all sides by raucous revelers. But Sakura didn't seem to mind; if anything, she seemed content to settle in and watch the party flow around her. Between the mission's lighthearted twist of a conclusion and the two-and-a-half empty wine glasses in front of her, she'd relaxed considerably: pressed against him shoulder to shin, her body heat passed readily through the thin cloth barriers separating them.

“His strategy certainly was compelling,” Itachi allowed. “If unconventional.”

Life was too precious to waste time wallowing in regrets, Naruto had said. And, though neither baker could undo the hurt they'd unknowingly caused one another, they could face the future hand in hand, if they so chose. Happiness was a choice! So was forgiveness! So was...love. Itachi didn't find the message particularly relevant—there would be no ‘hugging it out’ in his and Sakura's future, just an uneasy alliance at best. But, as Naruto's words resulted in a successful mission

with zero casualties, Itachi could not fault the boy's methods.

Sakura giggled, swaying drunkenly in place. "Maybe we can try it. I bet if we invited Plant Boy over for tea, we could clear up this who-ole misunderstanding. 'Cause that's what it is: all one big misunderstanding."

A shout grabbed Itachi's attention, and he snatched a stein out of the air inches before it would've collided with Sakura's skull. With a meticulously manicured nail, Sakura tapped at the frosted glass, and created a path through the condensation that ran from rim to base. Itachi sat it on the table to a round of applause he paid little attention to.

"Sun Tzu wrote that the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting," he said. "Perhaps there's some wisdom in that, even if it may not help us achieve our particular goals."

"Hmm." Sakura blinked slow and long, her gaze going fuzzy somewhere off in the middle distance. "Maybe," she said. "Maybe. You like sweets, huh?"

The non-sequitur gave Itachi only the barest of pauses. By now he knew to expect Sakura's rapid shifts in conversational topics, even if he still couldn't predict them. At least this question rooted itself in reality; he had indeed purchased a sweet for himself: a slice of sour cream raisin pie. A thing he had not known existed until the moment he saw it on the menu. Verdict: very good, but only because the establishment had gone with golden raisins soaked in rum.

"Yes."

"Good," Sakura said.

What a strange thing to say. Regrettably, Itachi had no opportunity to ask Sakura for clarification. Someone at the bar turned up the music, somebody else bought everybody a round, Naruto yanked him and Sakura out of the booth, and for the next four hours, Itachi moved with the rhythm of the crowd, as helpless as an otter out to sea with no kelp forest for miles.

“This is what having fun feels like!” Sakura shouted in his ear sometime around one AM. Sasuke ran past them with a half-empty bottle of vodka, chased by two women and a medium-sized dog. Naruto and the other team’s captain climbed on top of the bar to begin an impromptu dance-off. One of the bakers ran by with his shirt off and put a chef hat on Itachi’s head as he rushed out the door. Everyone was drinking, kissing, yelling, dancing, or some combination thereof.

“Are you sure?”

Sakura laughed—she laughed so hard she cried, and she stumbled forward, destined for the floor had Itachi not pulled her back up. The deep green of her eyes, and the unguarded look within them, startled him. It felt like looking into a forest—a forest he swore he’d walked through before, fancied himself master of, and then gotten completely lost in. This forest went on all around him, thick and vibrant and full of life. It countered Itachi’s stare with one of its own, ancient and secure in its power. Such an interesting girl, Sakura. She took Itachi by the hands, and didn’t let him go until the sun came up, spinning him around, and around, and around on the drink-sticky floor.

To Sasuke’s fourteenth birthday party, Sakura brought a cake. But not for Sasuke—for Itachi. He stared at the proffered confection sitting unwrapped in his lap, so startled by its very existence that he barely caught the stuttered explanations from the flustered girl sitting side by

side with him on the bridge in the Uchiha public garden—*their* bridge. In *their* garden.

“Sorry,” Sakura said. “For being an asshole.” There was no alcohol in her hands, and Itachi couldn’t smell it on her breath, but her cheeks were still a bright red.

“What do you mean?”

“With the—” Sakura made a fist and swung an invisible weapon through the air. “The thing with the swords, and I said that rocks were better...? Also in general. Because I am generally an asshole at times.”

“That was some weeks ago.”

A hot breeze rustled the leaves on the trees—stiff and shiny, they clattered together like knuckle bones in a betting bowl. Sakura undid her jacket, laying it carefully on the wooden slats of the bridge.

“That doesn’t make what I said okay, though. Tenzo said it’s shitty to be mean to people just because they’re better than you at things you don’t understand.” Echo flew down from a nearby tree, landed on Sakura’s head, and began to liberate sections of pink hair out of the tight bun. Long enough now to properly smooth back, Sakura’s hair sported a tiny bun more often than not, always with the golden bee pin holding the bun in place.

“He said that?”

“Not the ‘shitty’ part. He doesn’t cuss unless it’s really, really important and the situation is dire. But yes. And he’s right. I was just

being an asshole because I was bored and hot and tired. That's not okay."

"Ah." Itachi examined the sugary reparation in his lap. Glossy layers of candied, paper-thin blood orange slices adorned the surface of a small, round cake the size of his hand. It was heavier than it looked, and let off a smell rich with winter citrus blossoms and the bittersweet taste of toasted spices. "Thank you," he said, and meant it. A small picnic fork hid between sheets of parchment paper, thoughtfully placed where it would not become sticky.

Sakura watched him take the first bite, intense as a dog at a dinner table. It was, unequivocally, the best cake Itachi had ever eaten in his life. One bite of the spongy, syrup-soaked confection and his mind teleported him to the Land of Hot Water, and the border town his mother had taken him to while his father was away on business. A vine-covered cafe near the weekly bazaar offered endless entertainment to a precocious child, and Itachi had spent most of the afternoon flitting like a bird from stall to stall, free to roam so long as his mother had eyes on him. The air, heavy with steam in the midst of monsoon season, carried notes of raw sugar, vanilla, cardamom, cloves, allspice, and coriander throughout the little settlement, the pungent aroma filling Itachi's lungs, and sitting heavy on his tongue. When they left, the aroma went with them—hiding in their belongings, adhering to their skin, clinging to their hair. Two weeks after he'd returned with his family to Konoha, Itachi still caught a hint of that sweet perfume on the shirt he'd worn that day. Sugar, vanilla, cardamom, cloves, allspice, coriander, and...something else, something smelling of fresh-cut summer grass....

"It's an olive oil cake. I used fresh olive oil." Sakura put her hands over her eyes. "I made it by myself. Hopefully it's not too terrible. You don't have to eat it if it doesn't taste good."

Itachi was so stunned, both by the cake itself and Sakura's reflexive pessimism, that he nearly forgot to refute her negative assumption. But a sniffle alerted him to impending tears, and he rushed to prevent their unnecessary occurrence.

“It’s very good,” he assured her. And then, before he could think better of it: “Much better than your swordsmanship.”

The air around them ground to a halt, and Sakura’s hands dropped from her eyes to her mouth. Itachi was mortified. An awkward pause became a more awkward silence. But right when Itachi opened his mouth to convey sincere apologies for the faux pas, Sakura giggled, snorted, and then fell over backwards, shaking with laughter. The relief was immediate, and Itachi accepted the humility that followed. With one hand on the wooden walkway for balance, he turned at the waist so he could look Sakura in the face. As well as she’d taken his impulsive banter, he still felt an apology was in order. He was not prepared for what happened next. Wiping a few stray tears away, Sakura pushed herself upright, but stopped halfway there with a gasp.

“What?”

Green, green eyes opened wide, swallowing him up, reflecting the stars overhead—multicolored dancers flashing wildly in the cloudless, moonless sky. Every leaf, every blade of grass, every fern frond envied her color, and the way she brimmed with life in her too-brief moments of unguarded happiness.

“I’ve never seen you smile before,” Sakura said. “I like it.”

What else was there to do but thank her again? Against so many odds, they’d emerged as friends out of a maelstrom of war and pain and suffering. Itachi’s chest was too tight for words; their shared history was as painful as it was significant. He placed a hand on her upper back, hoping she’d understand. There they remained for the rest of the night: stuck together like mochi on their bridge, seeking solace in one another’s company, sharing bites of cake from the same fork.

Chapter End Notes

I am not fucking around with you people on the slow burn tag I have a note in my outline that reads Sakura Realizes Itachi has an Ass and it's like five chapters from now. You will earn the eventual explicit rating and you will thank me for it.

RIP anon who couldn't handle the knowledge that Morio hit it from the back. Maybe don't project as hard onto a protagonist and you won't feel compelled to slut-shame an off-brand interpretation of a fictional character. F in the chat for this one, lads. They'll never get to see Itachi self-actualize five chapters from now and then wall-fuck Sakura so hard she walks funny. But YOU will, because you are Strong.

1. Thoughts on Sun Tzu existing within the Naruto canon
2. Do you have a good recipe for [sour cream raisin pie](#)? Look, you use golden raisins and you can soak them in rum. It's good. They are not hard and chewy.
3. Do you want the recipe for [The Cake](#)? You do. Sakura uses fresh olive oil instead of melted butter.
4. Who is giving 13-year-old child soldiers vodka. That's IMMORAL.

That vision of the soft creature I would catch

Chapter Summary

In this chapter everybody cries because it's just that kind of week but it's a good cry

Chapter Notes

If you reread any parts and it seems like stuff was added, removed, or switched around, you are not losing your mind. I reread my work constantly while writing and that usually involves a fair bit of poking to match the overall tone, pacing, and themes I'm going for.

Re: Sakura and the cake, that is a callback to her fixation on finding out what food Sauce liked and then using it as a way to get close to him. Only, in the canon she's way off because she keeps going for sweet things and Sauce would rather raw a whole ass tomato than touch a cupcake. Oh man I wonder who likes sweets around here

critical information regarding this AU: Jiraiya drinks like a sorority girl on spring break

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Summer intruded upon autumn in the Land of Fire, delaying the gentler season's arrival with a series of heavy thunderstorms marked by mugginess, flash floods, and two tornadoes. Being in the southernmost region of the Land of Fire, the leaves in Konoha did not change but remained evergreen. Only the produce for sale in the outdoor markets marked the season's change.

Summer's final onslaught created plenty of work for ninja of all stripes. It took several joint operations to clear all the roads, some of which took Tenzo beyond the walls for days at a time. The day he returned, he met Sakura in Satsuko's tent—currently installed on the

coastline near the border with the Land of Rivers—and reminded her to pack her things.

“You’re growing up so fast,” Satsuko murmured. “Last month, I let the bees know you were leaving, and they haven’t settled since.” In Sakura’s hands, she placed a satchel containing a number of pollen-filled vials, at least a hundred packets of seeds, several illegal poisons, and a small storage scroll designed to seal away perishable food.

“Just a few things to remind you of home.” Satsuko’s eyes lingered on the jeweled bee in Sakura’s hair. “Don’t forget who you are, my love. Celebrate life wherever you go, and guard your heart against despair. As long as you are willing to fight for happiness, there is hope.”

“Thank you for everything. I love you, Grandmother.”

“And I love you.”

Vision blurred by tears, Sakura left the tent and mounted her horse, taking the muddy roads at a canter all the way home. So this thing was really happening, wasn’t it? Destiny called, and Sakura had answered. Sakura was leaving. She was leaving Konoha, setting off on a journey she hadn’t expected and could not possibly have predicted. It didn’t feel real. The girl she’d been in that other, faraway world felt more and more like an abstraction every day: a doppelganger restricted to dreams and memories, nothing more—an Other Sakura, whereas her current self was the Real Sakura.

When had she changed her mind? What monumental shift had occurred deep within her heart, telling her that This World was now her home, instead of a strange place in which she would live as an eternal stranger. Though Sakura stewed over the question endlessly while she packed, she couldn’t seem to remember. There was no moment, no sudden realization, and no single event that drove her to

this dimensional acceptance. It had happened all on its own, with no assistance or acknowledgement. It simply was.

Itachi could not say he *disliked* Jiraiya. Dislike implied a certain understanding that went beyond the surface, where simple annoyance had room to become disdain. Dislike was personal. And though Itachi had fed the Other Jiraiya information on the Akatsuki for several years, the two men had never been close—far from it, since on more than one occasion they'd attempted killing one another in earnest so as not to break Itachi's cover.

And Itachi could not fault either version of Jiraiya in the area of martial skill; nine months to the day after the Fourth Hokage's judgment, Jiraiya the Toad Sage stuck his head through Itachi's bedroom window at three AM—drunk off his ass, yet having bypassed several warding seals, numerous guards, three crow spotters, and a smorgasbord of traps to gain access to the inner compound—*all* for the singular purpose of telling Itachi to get his ass to training ground twenty-seven at seven AM sharp—*sharp*, Uchiha—for a skills evaluation. So, here Itachi was at training ground twenty-seven. At seven AM sharp. No Jiraiya. No sign of Jiraiya. No indication that Jiraiya had ever been here.

Itachi sat down in the dirt and waited, Sharingan activated and every sense alert. This would happen one of two ways, Itachi imagined; first, this was some sort of test, and Jiraiya wanted to see how Itachi responded to a lack of structure—would he go back home? Ask someone if they'd seen Jiraiya? Hunt Jiraiya down himself? Second, and possibly the more probable option: Jiraiya had passed out somewhere, and he was still asleep or nursing one hell of a hangover.

One hour later, no Jiraiya. Itachi left the training ground, a heavily wooded area intended for close-quarter combat work. On his way back to the city center, Itachi kept an ear out, hoping to see a vast expanse of white hair partially concealed in the bush, and came up

empty. A change of strategy, then. Itachi racked his mind for what he knew of Jiraiya's habits. The man was a deviant, which meant there was a chance Itachi could find him near the hot springs—an hypothesis Itachi had no interest in exploring. He went to Ichiraku instead—like student, like teacher—and found Jiraiya slumped over on the counter, snoozing next to a bowl of cold, half-eaten ramen.

No, not 'dislike.' Jiraiya was not a dislikable person. 'Difficult,' perhaps—'Interesting,' if one aspired to interpersonal diplomacy. A light poke, and the Sage awoke with a snort, followed by an emphatic insistence that this entire scheme had been to test Itachi's mettle, and that Jiraiya's current situation in no way related to his having downed an entire bottle of strawberry vodka the night before.

They returned to training ground twenty-seven—Itachi walking, Jiraiya lurching—to find it in use. Tired, and more than a little cranky, Itachi suggested one of the private grounds in the Uchiha district, hoping whatever Jiraiya had in store wouldn't take too long. In the end, he was right: Jiraiya ordered Itachi to perform the basic Academy skills routine for ninjutsu, genjutsu, and taijutsu, then requested a basic swordsmanship demonstration, and finally capped off with a demonstration of Uchiha fighting styles and Sharingan use. The whole affair took less than half an hour.

Afterwards, Jiraiya sat down in the grass and motioned for Itachi to do the same.

"Not bad, not bad," Jiraiya said. "Lot of work for me to do, some fixing here and there, but it's a solid start. In terms of Sharingan development and training, I'll leave that up to your clan. First we'll open up your basics—you've already mastered your clan's fighting style, but I'd like to set you up with a more, shall we say, 'eclectic' skill foundation. When you travel as often and as far as me, it's important to know more than one dance when you show up to the masquerade, right? And since your chakra reserves are already a bit below average, having more dirty tricks in your arsenal will only help."

That made sense. After becoming a missing-nin, Itachi's Sharingan had developed to the point where he heavily relied on its massive power in a pinch. Uchiha techniques from all three disciplines—genjutsu, taijutsu, and ninjutsu—tended to favor mid-range fighting, and it wasn't uncommon for Itachi to have run up against an opponent whose abilities had the advantage over his—of course, back then he'd had his Mangekyo to lean on. It mattered little if an opponent had the advantage in fighting style when one glance sent them to a pocket dimension for three days condensed into seconds of real world time. In this world, Itachi had no such abilities to fall back on.

“You want me to become more of a generalist rather than heavily specialize, then,” Itachi clarified—damn authors and their linguistic flourishes. “In other words, rather than rely heavily on standard, formal techniques such as those used by my clan, you believe I should master a number of different fighting styles.”

“You could not possibly have put it in less exciting terms, but I know there's no cure for being born an Uchiha. Don't worry, I will *not* hold that against you.”

Itachi did not feel the least bit slighted by the assessment. Even when he'd been at the apex of his power, before his illness overtook the medication, a serious one-on-one fight with Jiraiya would've ended in stalemate at best, Itachi's death at worst—and the man was in his fifties now, as he'd been back then. There was no shame in an Acceptable rating from Jiraiya, even if it stung on principle.

“Thank you for the evaluation,” Itachi said. He meant it. “What other skills would you have me develop?”

“Nothing set in stone right now.” Jiraiya tapped the scroll strapped to his back. “But I want to see how you take to fuinjutsu. Limitations in chakra reserves don't matter as much with sealwork, and you've got

the smarts to keep track of the endless rules and restrictions. Hell, you'll probably end up inventing a few of your own. Remember your poor teacher when you get famous, kid."

"I will."

"Good. But on a more serious note, we'll be doing a lot of investigation on seals out in the field. This is strictly need-to-know, but during Orochimaru's autopsy, the medical team found one hell of a curse seal placed directly on his heart—one more complex than anything I've ever seen, with bits of language and flourishes I haven't seen anywhere else. The only thing that comes close to it in terms of power are the seals used to create jinchuuriki, and a few surviving examples of master-level seals from Whirlpool. Orochimaru himself was a sealing master. So not only did this mystery person take him down in such a way that made placing the seal possible, they also created one the smartest man I've ever met couldn't undo."

Itachi blinked, and his body went ice cold. *Wrong, wrong, something is wrong.* A curse seal? There had been no such thing applied to Orochimaru in the other world. Impossible. It should have been impossible here, too. When had anyone had the opportunity, let alone the skill, to do such a thing? Killing the man was one thing. Keeping him helpless long enough to apply a seal complex enough to control him was...

"I didn't know."

Jiraiya gave Itachi an inquisitive look—a slight squint to his eyes, and a curl of his lips. But just as quickly as it appeared, the look was gone, replaced by Jiraiya's standard, deceptively casual bearing. "Of course you didn't know. Anyway, I've been doing some recon on a certain group for a couple years now. A terrorist organization out of Ame is rumored to have overthrown the old Salamander. Now, I am the humblest of men, but if this group is powerful enough to take out a shinobi the Sannin couldn't kill, we got problems. They might have

been the ones meddling with Orochimaru, and for that matter, they might have arranged Kabuto's assassination. Even better, I think the man that attacked you and your girl at the safehouse has a connection to them. Small world, Uchiha. Small world."

Akatsuki—naturally. It would make sense, actually, for them to have had a hand in Orochimaru's demise. Nagato would gain a great deal by taking out a sannin once part of their number; Orochimaru's usefulness might very well have outlived his tenuous mutual agreement with Akatsuki not to interfere with one another's business.

The journey ahead would be a curious one, Itachi thought. With his knowledge, he'd have to be careful what he said and did on the road. Of course, it was in everyone's best interest to hobble the Akatsuki as much as possible in the short term, but the more this world changed, the less applicable Itachi's intel would be. Lying was out of the question; though, perhaps he could approach his contributions in a more roundabout way. Three years was a long time to keep up an act, but that discipline was one Itachi knew he'd mastered long ago.

"When are we leaving?"

"I'll pick you up at the main gates next Wednesday at seven AM sharp."

Itachi, still irritated from that morning, couldn't resist a second jab. "Will you?"

"A smartass, huh? Maybe there is hope for you yet, Uchiha."

Three years. If Itachi was still alive at the end of it, he thought as he watched Jiraiya amble away in search of painkillers, he'd buy them both a round of drinks.

Few activities quieted Sakura more than packing. Regardless of the upcoming journey's purpose, the act of determining which of her belongings held the most value always gave her pause. This blanket her parents had wrapped her in as an infant, the same one in this world as the other—bring or not bring? That book she couldn't stop rereading—bring or not bring? Extra weapons? Formal clothes? A half-finished quilt? Sakura wanted to bring it all, but she could only carry so much.

At the same time, she didn't want to renounce all creature comforts in favor of uncompromising practicality. Tenzo wouldn't criticize her for wanting to bring along some literal emotional baggage, but there simply wasn't enough room in her backpack for quilts *and* stuffed animals *and* good luck charms *and* books...and on, and on. She didn't have to worry about the things she and Itachi stole from the hideout: the Akatsuki bingo book and the curse seal research went with Itachi. They both agreed he could put the volumes to better use. The Sharingan research was safe in Itachi's bedroom.

So what did Sakura love the most? What would fit? And what would she have to relinquish in order to move on? At least she wouldn't have to worry about packing for all environments. Tenzo indicated that they'd return to Konoha for extra preparation before visiting an extreme climate. While she was thinking about it, Sakura pulled out all her best cold-weather gear; they were headed north, Tenzo said—far away, to terrain elevated enough to require heavy layering even in early autumn.

In the end, she allowed herself four luxuries: Honey-style summer formal wear (the lighter fabrics would cut down weight even more), a book of poems, the bee pin, and her nicer set of sketching pencils. That meant there was just enough room for a few small presents from friends and family, and nothing else. Sakura left her bedroom, met up with her parents and a few other Harunos in the gardens, and they began their solemn procession towards the next chapter of Sakura's

life.

Everyone was waiting for her at the main gates: Tenzo with his pack, the captain of the first rotational ANBU escort, and a whole mass of well-wishers. Naruto, Sasuke, Kakashi-sensei, Mikoto and Fukagu, Minato and Kushina, and a smattering of acquaintances from the teaching hospital had all shown up to bid her goodbye. From her parents, Sakura received two leather-bound novels. From Naruto, she received a silver locket containing a blurry photo of Team 7. From Minato she received nothing—appropriate, given restrictions on higher ranking officers gifting nonessential items to subordinates—but Kushina placed an entire booklet of ramen vouchers in her hand, to be used on return visits to Konoha. From Kakashi, Sakura received a knitting kit that looked suspiciously partially-used. From Itachi's parents, and the Uchiha Clan by extension, she received a lovely imported billao shortsword, with a sheepskin sheath embossed with cherry blossom motifs.

That left Itachi, who had brought his own gift. Sakura bit her lip to keep from smiling when the energy of the crowd intensified the second Itachi made his way towards her. Were they expecting a kiss? Tears? Sakura provided neither, but she did give Itachi a hug, to a chorus of 'awww's and one 'oh, my' from the back.

He held out another leatherbound book; unlike the others she'd accepted that day, however, this book was very old: written by hand, each character painstakingly shaped onto the fine vellum pages. There were sketches of plants throughout, with detailed notes under each one. The etchings on the cover told Sakura it had been in the Uchiha Clan's possession for eight hundred years.

"Itachi, I can't take this." Sakura held the book out, lightheaded from the effort of standing in place when all she wanted to do was snatch it and run away hooting with glee. It was probably one of the more valuable items she'd ever touched in her life, and it was obvious why the Uchiha thought Sakura worthy of using it.

“Borrow it, then.” Itachi placed his hands over hers, and Sakura noted that they’d begun to dwarf her own. “It’s a catalog of medicinal plants within the Land of Fire, and many beyond. When it was written, current international borders did not exist. The Uchiha were still nomadic, then.”

“But it’s—are your parents okay with this?”

“They are. They were pleased that I asked in the first place. I think they’d already had you in mind to inherit it.”

“But why would I be the one—oh.” Sakura cleared her throat, and shifted backward until Itachi’s hands returned to his sides. “Because we’re...”

“Right. Most likely, they would’ve given it to you as a wedding present. Circumstances being what they are, they agreed to let you use it sooner.”

A wedding present. For *her* wedding. To Itachi. Which was a thing that would happen in the relatively near future. Because they were engaged, and had been this whole time. Funny how a thing like that could slip Sakura’s mind—not the fact of it, but what it *meant*. What it required of her. Using her relationship with the Uchiha Clan for political strategy was one thing—those battles were fought far beyond her sight, and continued with little effort by her own hand, as the operation naturally fell upon the adults to manage. But thinking about a wedding, and her part in it, and all the things in the days and weeks that would come after was entirely another.

A powerful feeling bloomed in the pit of her stomach; Sakura wasn’t sure what to name the feeling, but its strength frightened her. Before she could do something stupid like blush, she gave the book a place of honor among her supplies, gave Itachi one last hug, and ran towards

the gate, where Tenzo waited for her. The tears didn't come until later, when the waves and goodbyes had long melted into the trees. Tenzo passed her a tissue, and patted her on the shoulder when she was finished.

"Where are we going?"

"North." Tenzo unfurled a map and showed her. "Up here, past the Land of Iron, all the way to the vast, scenic tundras in the Land of Silence. It's one of the harshest environments on earth, for plants as well as animals. Frozen solid part of the year, and in the winter it goes without a sunrise for an entire month."

"How could anything possibly grow there?"

"Life finds a way, even in the Whispering Mountains. It'll take us two weeks to get to the foothills, and a day to set up a proper base camp."

"How high will we climb?"

"To see what we're looking for? All the way up."

"You've got to be shitting me. There's no way plants live on top of those mountains. They're miles high."

"And yet, plants do live on top of those mountains."

"There's hardly anything up there. What's the point?"

“The point is to keep living no matter what, Sakura. Somewhere up there is a miniature forest of *Eremogone bryophylla*, and it’s just waiting to be drawn.”

Before the holy flame of Amaterasu, burning in her place of honor in the Naka Shrine, Itachi stood before his father. They were less than an arm’s length apart—too close to suggest estrangement, but not close enough for a hug. It was, in a way, a perfect microcosm of their relationship both in this world and the last: father and son, two beings in a constant state of misunderstanding.

“You’re leaving.”

“Yes.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

Fugaku placed his packet of herbs in the fire. Itachi followed, though he watched his father out of the corner of his eye rather than keep his gaze upon the shrine, as was appropriate. The Other Fugaku had never been religious, as far as Itachi knew; revenge and war had been that man’s religion, and in the end he’d become the fatted calf. This Fugaku grieved deeply, and scraped off the scabs of his painful memories, thus remaining permanently wounded. They were alike in that way.

“I have something for you, Itachi.”

Startled, Itachi raised his head, finding his father’s intense, black eyes looking back at him. Into his hand, Itachi’s father placed a small storage seal.

“I’m trusting you with this,” he said, “because you’ve shown me you know what sacrifice truly means. There was a time in my life I thought I knew, and then my son died, and I found I knew nothing. Not all sacrifices are good, or useful, or even necessary. For a long time, the Uchiha sacrificed one another—family, people they were meant to love and protect—in reckless pursuit of power. And we have nothing to show for those sacrifices but pain. I wanted you to live a life devoid of pain—a perfect life, for which no sacrifices are required—but I understand now that such a life is impossible. It is far better to learn when sacrifice is necessary and how to deal with the aftermath. Pain can be mitigated, but grief and regret are eternal. That is my burden, but it isn’t your fate. Open it. You’ll need your Sharingan.”

Itachi lifted the scroll to eye level, and cracked the seal with a whisper of chakra. With his Sharingan spinning, he scanned the first few paragraphs, finding the hidden bits of text lurking between the lines that a non-user wouldn’t see. The scroll narrated the history of the Sharingan, including both the mythical and historical origins, with interesting commentary on how the two played well together. He got to the first series of sketches, and froze. Rows and rows of red circles peered up at him, each of them containing intricate black designs: Mangekyo Sharingan. These were labeled with names and dates Itachi supposed were birth and death years.

But that was not what had stopped him in his tracks. Beyond the rows of unblinking eyes, an even larger circle lurked, still half-concealed by the tightly coiled paper. Itachi held his breath as he revealed the fullness of its form: pale lavender, and six concentric rings ending in an unnaturally small pupil. The Rinnegan. And beneath it, a name that had been scratched out. Itachi held his breath, and forced his shoulders to relax.

“I will not speak his name, only tell you that he is your direct ancestor: a grandfather going back ten generations. He killed his own children for those eyes, Itachi. And nothing came of it but pain. They say he laughed himself to death in the end, ranting and raving about darkness and the moon. Madara was not the first to strive for the Rinnegan, or the Mangekyo, in spite of what rumors persist outside our walls. But as long as we guard our hearts against hatred, those men will be the last. Perhaps you will find a way to bring the Sharingan out of the darkness once and for all. Until then, remember that I love you, Itachi. Whatever else happens, whatever else you become, I hope you carry that in your heart.”

They embraced, and Itachi felt a sharp sting in his sinuses when he buried his face in his father's kimono. The last time he'd felt either, he'd been a small boy. Fugaku held on to him until the sun rose at their backs, warming their skin and heralding the first day of Itachi's unexpected adventure.

Chapter End Notes

Tune in next season for: Itachi's Bizarre Adventure

[note from the wife:] Please discuss US-localized stand names for Itachi's Mangyeko Sharingan and whatever it is Jiraiya has going on.

1. What is the theme song for Itachi's Bizarre Adventure
2. Who are Itachi and Jiraiya going to beat the shit out of and then subsequently induct into their travel gang?

And now...one last look at Itachi and Sakura before they get their second chance at growing up:



[art by croxovergoddess](#)

also known as the artist behind those Draw the Squad meme templates that literally never get credited. as of this chapter posting they are taking commissions! This (2 full characters, color, background) was fifty USD. Fifty! Give them your money.

The damp heat, the loud scold of a mockingbird, the scratching thorns

Chapter Summary

In this chapter Jiraiya and Itachi compete to become the bitchiest asshole alive (results: inconclusive)

Chapter Notes

Toads say trans rights. They will eat anything they can fit in their mouth: cis people, trans people, everyone. All life is potentially edible. And I think that's beautiful.

Technical notes:

Name (age)

Timestamp

Focus/Theme

The plant images are meant to represent pages in the Uchiha plant book, with the notes being in Sakura's hand in her journal.

*Ame (Rain) resides in a country with no canon name. I'm going with the Land of Storms; I've seen it on a couple RP maps when I was scouring for any kind of geography that made sense, and I like it. As Itachi and Sakura go on their journeys to Find Themselves (and level up), there will be some liberties taken with geography re: the minor nations. All the ones I mention are canon places though!

This took so long to post because I wanted to get way ahead with my chapters. I've written up to chapter 17. Once I'm done with all the first drafts I'll post more often.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

From the illustrious journal of one Sakura Haruno

I'll hand it to the Uchiha: they are not hurting for confidence. The title of the manuscript that Itachi gave me is 'PLANTS.' Not 'Plants and their uses' or 'Plants of the Five Great Nations.' Just the be-all, end-all book of plants.

It took me some time to get through the introductory notes (the dialect is a bit archaic, and there were a few terms I switched out for more modern interpretations), but here is a summary of the head scribe's introduction, for personal reference:

Before we [the Uchiha Clan] came to a permanent rest in our chosen heartland, we traveled throughout the continent as [peripatetic] nomads, exchanging our forged weapons for resources. It was this itinerant lifestyle that allowed us to become highly respected experts in [medicinal botany], because there were mystics (?) among us who studied the land. This book was written to safeguard generations of knowledge first described through art and oral history. May it enrich the lives of our children, and our children's children, forever.

Itachi Uchiha (15)

Year 1, Month 2

Summoning

Traveling with Jiraiya the Toad Sage was, of all things, rather enjoyable. That didn't mean he had no flaws, of course: the man had a personality like a hair-trigger trebuchet, ever-ready to fire back a response, a punch, or a pithy witticism. At the same time, Itachi found him to be compassionate: their travels had been delayed more than once purely so Jiraiya could start and finish some sort of local humanitarian effort. They'd spent the entirety of week three helping a village dig belongings out of a mudslide—long enough to lose the trail of a man with known connections to Akatsuki's financial side. Itachi had just begun to wonder if Jiraiya's career success was a fluke when the village head approached them on day seven with a dossier of the

quarry in question; it included the location of a safe house, where they found the man the following day. Surface-level judgements made fools of even the wisest men.

The arrangement was not without drawbacks, however. Irrelevant distractions were frequent, and coincided with relative proximity to a liquor store or local still. But occasional distractions allowed for much needed downtime; the introverted Itachi grew to appreciate the regular moments to himself. While Jiraiya lay passed out or lurked in a red light district, Itachi spent the time meditating, reading, or writing letters home. Some letters went to Sakura: another reason why Itachi appreciated the alone time; Jiraiya had a habit of snatching the paper away to read the contents with a dramatic, swooning affect that got on Itachi's very last nerve. He also had an aggravating habit of rifling through Itachi's belongings without even a token attempt to pretend he hadn't.

Harmless, childish games, all of them. But even then, Jiraiya was keeping score on something. And by the time Itachi found out, it was far too late to enter the game on his own terms.

Of course, Jiraiya waited for the worst possible moment to lay his cards on the table. They'd just settled in for a private dinner at a roadside hotel, and Itachi had just taken his first bite when Jiraiya broached the topic with all the grace of an avalanche.

"I know about the documents you and your girl stole from the hideout," Jiraiya said, casual as anything. He folded his hands and placed them on the tabletop. "Just thought I'd mention it."

Itachi choked on his noodles.

"Now," Jiraiya continued, as though he'd said nothing amiss. "I'm not in a mood to tattle today. But that all depends on what you say next, so think carefully. Because if you're going to tell me some kind of

story, you'd better be consistent. Also, you should keep better track of your things."

Itachi coughed. "When—?"

"Remember when I stopped by your house to tell you which training ground to go to?"

"Those documents were sealed with—"

"And you're looking at one of the greatest sealing masters of the modern era. Anyway, like I said, I'm not going into this arrangement of ours with a punitive mindset. I have my own opinions on why I think you two took what you took. But I want to hear it from you, first."

Itachi's thoughts crashed into one another like a meeting of two fronts. What was safe? What could he get away with? Was Jiraiya bluffing, and his statement merely a hypothesis based on circumstantial evidence? Would earning his trust now pay off later?

"We did take documents, yes." Itachi spoke slowly, intending to give himself as much buffer as possible, knowing Jiraiya would spot the hesitation right away but betting on the man's ignorance as to its true cause. There was no way Jiraiya would accept an assertion that their taking those specific documents was truly random. But he also hadn't confirmed the identity of the documents. Had Jiraiya found the bingo book, the book of curse seals, both, or neither? Itachi made a decision: stick to the truth as closely as possible, with a simple twist in motivation.

"After Sakura stabilized my injury, I suggested she scan the library. Sakura took the book of seals because of the extensive warding in the

area that had been sabotaged by an expert. It didn't feel right. There was also a bingo book for a terrorist group that she took; it contained photos of the man who attacked us at the safe house, and we intended to conduct our own research into the matter." A beat. "There was also a book of detailed Sharingan research. I turned it over to my clan; it's currently in the archivists' possession." That one was completely true, and Itachi prayed its inclusion would encourage Jiraiya to lower his guard regarding the two previous claims.

For a full minute, Jiraiya leaned back, arms folded, and studied Itachi with a look of deadly calm. Itachi forced himself not to tense above the table, but beneath it he gripped the material of his pants so hard his fingers ached.

"Huh," Jiraiya said. "Well, how about that." He reached into his pocket, and placed three items on the table: the bingo book, the book of curse seals...and the Sharingan dossier. Damn. The man was good. Itachi could not help a slight drooping of his shoulders in relief.

Jiraiya tapped the dossier's unassuming, drab bindings. "I thought you'd have left this one out for sure. Not certain what I think about that, to be perfectly honest with you. Well, consider your first test passed, kid."

"What if I had failed?"

"Then I would *not* have invited you to an exclusive ice cream social atop yon picturesque hill. Thirty minutes, Uchiha."

Jiraiya vanished in a cloud of pointy white locks. Alone, Itachi rested his forehead against the table, sighed, and began picking hairs out of his soup one by one.

[image]

Bombina orientalis

Shockingly, Jiraiya showed up on time—with ice cream, to boot. While Itachi sampled the offering—it was a frozen custard, actually, with bits of candied orange peel and coriander seed set against a background of aged rum—Jiraiya laid out a scroll with great flourish.

“What do you know about toads, Uchiha?” Jiraiya unfurled the delicate paper, smoothing a few specks of dust off of its surface. Crouching down, he turned his back on Itachi to examine the writing.

Itachi eyed the scroll with apprehension. Amphibians were flexible creatures, he knew. But most of his encounters with them had been on the antagonistic side, and left behind unpleasant memories. The smell and texture of the toad esophagus Jiraiya once used to trap both him and Kisame never really left Itachi. And one could hardly muse upon amphibious summons without recalling Hanzo of the Salamander.

“I have a crow familiar, sensei.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, you broody Uchihas and your graveyard birds. Nobody said you can’t do both.”

“I suppose.”

“Get your ass over here.” Jiraiya made the signs, nicked his thumb, and summoned a small toad. Brown, squat, and orange-eyed, it stared up at Itachi with what he could only assume was a sullen expression.

“Now,” Jiraiya said. “I’ve given you provisional status, because I feel like you’re a guy who needs to do the thing before making a big decision. I get it. So the toads know we’re practicing today, and you’ll be able to summon one as long as you follow my lead *exactly*. This is day one of sealing school. Remember those hand signs I made? And how I used the blood to power the seal?”

“Yes.”

“Good, good. I’ll start you off basic—really basic—until you get the hang of it. Don’t get upset if all you get at first are tadpoles, all right? It’s fine.”

“Ah.”

“Because *my* first time—”

Itachi’s hands whipped through the signs faster than most eyes could follow. He nicked his thumb, and pressed a blood-slick palm to the earth. A puff of smoke obscured the area, but when it cleared there stood a brightly-colored toad where none had been before; the top of its head drew level with Itachi’s, and its body was bright green, save for the belly which flashed a gaudy go-away red; an even spread of dark spots completed the look, which altogether made for a pleasing sight.

“Hello,” the toad said. “I am Kosuke, a fire-belly toad. You may refer to me as ‘they’ or ‘them.’ I specialize in infiltration, but I am also proficient in oil- and fire-based ninjutsu, sound-based genjutsu, and

toxin production. It is nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Itachi held out his hand; Kosuke nudged it with a chubby, clawed foot.

“Son of a bitch,” Jiraiya muttered. “Of course you got a fire-belly on your first try. Damn Uchihas.”

At the sound of Jiraiya’s voice, Kosuke turned their head. Their sullen, toady expression became, with the slightest of twitches, amused.

“Lord Jiraiya.” Kosuke’s voice, previously congenial, took on a humored lilt. “So nice to see you not ablaze.”

“You’re never gonna let me live that down, are ya. Two smartasses: you deserve one another.”

“It is no fault of mine that you bit off more than you can chew, Lord Jiraiya. Perhaps if you spilled less vodka on your clothing, it might become less flammable.”

“It was *one time*.”

“And yet: so memorable, so topographically significant. That grove still hasn’t completely grown back, if you were curious.”

“I was not.”

Not bad. Not bad, indeed. In fact, Itachi was beginning to expect he might *like* toads.



Anemone patens L.

Arctic crocus

A little purple flower with a furry stem. Each stem has one bell-shaped flower, purple to white in color and many yellow stamens; Blooms sooner at sea level, and later for high-elevation patches. When it's time to drop seeds, the flower becomes a fluffy seed head like an oversized dandelion. Air carries the plumed achenes (fancy term for dandelion puff thingies) long distances before they settle and start a new group; Crocus flower numbers increase after a fire. Fires get rid of plant litter, increase available light, and enrich the soil. Because it is self-seeding, hardy, and fire-friendly, there is less competition with other plants within the first few years, so they have time to establish themselves. Might be one of my favorite plants along with the ones that grow on lava fields. Nature said nothing can grow here and the arctic crocus said fuck you.

Sakura Haruno (14)

Year 1, Month 3

Pseudotsuga menziesii

Sakura descended Mount Secret a little older, a little wiser, and filled with admiration for the sheer stubbornness of life. Tenzo gave Sakura and the Konoha entourage two days of recovery at the base camp before packing everything back up to head south, intending to return to the Land of Fire for a check-in. The stop in Honey was an unexpected surprise, one that turned from a two-night stay at the Haruno family's ancestral estate to a weeklong flurry of visitations, dinners, and formal requests for introduction. Sakura soaked up every bit of cultural substance that she could: while she'd picked up a lot of things in Konoha, that was nothing compared to the true well from which her family's culture had drawn.

Here, the dialect her family used was ubiquitous, the clothing she saw on the streets matched her own, people ate her favorite foods and shared the same tribal religion. They even put their makeup on the same. Sakura spent much of her time attending social functions—

everyone wanted to meet the Honey girl with the power to sprout trees with a single touch—but there were numerous requests for private audiences. Of the latter, none were more unexpected than the request Sakura received from one Lady Tsunade Senju to share an afternoon tea.

Sakura spent an hour getting ready while Tenzo waited in one of the outer gardens. First she put on her formal outfit, decided that was *too* formal and went with her training clothes, but reconsidered after realizing those needed another wash and training clothes were far too *informal*. Tsunade, she learned from one of the senior attendants, was visiting a rigidly traditional local Senju branch that still kept a semi-formal clan structure independent of other branches. Traditional sorts expected proper etiquette. Sakura wound up borrowing something pretty from a similarly-sized cousin and arrived with Tenzo in tow at the Senjus' main house, precisely on time. A guard escorted them to a sunroom that looked more jungle than abode; there were plants everywhere: in pots, climbing up the walls, hanging from the ceiling.

Tsunade looked...normal. Completely normal, and completely familiar. Sakura had to dig her fingernails into her palms to keep from hugging her Not-Teacher, Not-Mentor, Not-Hokage. It hurt, like seeing Sasuke had hurt. But Sakura packed those feelings away for now, and focused on the woman before her. She had business to take care of. Later, there would be time to journal and, perhaps, write Itachi a letter.

"I've heard about you." Tsunade's dark eyes sparked with amusement over the rim of her teacup. "The mokuton girl. And quite the copycat ninja—you've been trying to form the Byakugo, I hear. And making Konoha's poor landscapers cry."

Sakura flushed. "Training grounds are *meant* to be destroyed, and if they had specific trees in mind that weren't supposed to be uprooted, they should've—"

Tsunade laughed in that funny way of hers: throaty, like she meant it, but always with that hint of high class restraint. Hearing it took the wind out of Sakura's sails in more ways than one.

"You're feisty, aren't you?"

"I'm sorry." Mortified at how easily Tsunade had been able to provoke her, Sakura lowered her eyes. "I shouldn't lose my temper so easily."

Tsunade shrugged. "As long as you're prepared to face the consequences, lose it all you want. I can't promise you I won't bite back, though. But, I'll cut to the chase: I'm interested in this idea of yours to fill a Byakugou with nature chakra."

"You think it's a good idea?"

"It's certainly an idea. Time will tell if it's good. Nature chakra has near-limitless potential—from our limited perspective, that is. You aren't the first mokuton user to wonder just how wide that river is, and what it would take to cross it. Your teacher here showed you the Senju Forest, didn't he? Then you already know the consequences of attempting a crossing unprepared."

Sakura glanced at Tenzo out of the corner of her eye to see him staring ahead with a shuttered expression. "How did you know?"

"That forest isn't public land, Sakura." Tsunade extended a hand, gesturing to the space around them. "It belongs to the Senju. The branch responsible for its maintenance had to give their permission for its use. You weren't told? Odd. Given your current ambitions, I'd have thought Tenzo here would exercise more transparency."

The tension in the room threatened suffocation. Outclassed by whatever battle of wills was taking place, Sakura picked helplessly at the folds of her skirt. “I’m not sure what you mean, Lady Tsunade.”

Tenzo cleared his throat. Tsunade responded with pursed lips and a raised eyebrow. But while Tsunade had strength, confidence, and poise, she couldn’t beat Tenzo in a contest of patience. Like an old, old tree, he rested on his deep roots and waited out the silence.

“Oh, to hell with it,” Tsunade snapped at him. Her teacup developed two tiny fissures. “You know why I’m here. Tell her, or I will.”

Tenzo frowned, the lines on his face deepened by the stress he normally hid so well.

“The Senju want you to become a sage, Sakura.” Tenzo finished his tea, and sat the empty cup on the table. Tender leaves, once tightly coiled into fragrant balls before the water transformed them, lay in a heap at the base. “A mokuton sage. They’ve been trying to produce one for hundreds of years.”

Sakura looked at Tenzo. She looked at Tsunade. And again. Both were stiff as stone.

“I thought the First was a mokuton sage. Wasn’t he?”

“A slug sage,” Tsunade corrected. “He was able to attain a perfect form, but always with slug chakra—never with the mokuton. Everyone who ever tried was overwhelmed by nature chakra, and became trees. The toads, snakes, and slugs all have established shortcuts and safety measures to avoid that fate. But the mokuton has always been believed to be too close to the source to manipulate directly. The human trees in the Senju Forest are all mokuton users

who failed in their attempt to access pure, unfiltered nature chakra. That's why it's always one's own chakra—or less potent forms of nature chakra, like what the slugs use—that powers mokuton techniques.”

The sleeping trees, and the faintest echoes of human life within, still haunted Sakura; she'd had more than a few nightmares depicting her arboreal demise—swallowed up by the same ability that had once saved her life. “But then...” Sakura concentrated on the warm feeling of her tea, the heat seeping into her skin. It centered her. “If that's the case, why do they want me to try it?”

Tsunade and Tenzo shared another, somewhat less hostile glance. This time, it was Tenzo who spoke.

“Accepted knowledge in Konoha is that the First died of old age while training in the Senju Forest. But that isn't true. What happened is that he entered the Forest and never came out again. Before his disappearance, he'd been trying to perfect a mokuton sage mode that wouldn't overwhelm its user. Based on witness accounts and his own journals, we know that he identified a possible source for the mokuton; he theorized that the mokuton was not purely genetic, but that contact with some sort of energy source was what triggered it in people. My own existence questions that theory, but at the time, it made sense. Mokuton users had always triggered their abilities by training within that forest, and only that forest. The day he disappeared, the First confided in his brother that he intended to locate the center of the Forest: a place no one had ever been—supposedly. Anyone who tried found themselves walking in circles—ending up at the same edge they'd entered, despite the fact that they'd maintained a consistent cardinal direction. After the First disappeared, there were no more mokuton users in the Senju line.

To answer your question more directly, the Senju want to complete that research. What their true motive is, I'm not sure. It's likely they believe a sage mode would answer their questions about where the mokuton comes from, and how to control where it manifests. I may be able to use the mokuton, but my abilities are based solely on pieces of

the First that were transplanted in my body by Orochimaru. If I stopped taking medication to keep my body from rejecting the transplants, it's likely my abilities would go away entirely. So we believe."

"If you are able to store nature chakra within a controlled space like a byakugou," Tsunade said, "then you may be able to access that power indirectly, and attain sage mode without the drawbacks that come along with it. Or, you might be able to use that chakra to reach the center of the Forest, and see what it was the First thought he found. Either way, it's a win for my family."

Tenzo's expression folded in on itself, disdain written in taunted cheeks, narrowed eyes, and tense brows. "Sakura isn't an experiment. I have no intention of allowing her to become one."

Tsunade matched Tenzo's scowl with one of her own. "Why the hell do you think *I'm* here and not one of the old farts? This is an intervention, and I was the one intervening. I'm the last person who wants to see a promising kunoichi sacrificed for the sake of progress that might not even pay out. They'll agree to stay off of her back as long as she's focused on developing the mokuton. When they heard about what she wanted to try with the seal as a workaround—"

"Which wasn't exactly common knowledge," Tenzo interjected. "And here I thought Konoha kept its cards close to its chest."

"Keep your thong on, kid. We're all in this shit together. Point is, they're frothing at the mouth to get a piece of her, and the best thing *both* of us can do to keep her safe is train her ass off. I'm here for two months. Stay in Honey, and I'll train with her every day: medical ninjutsu, taijutsu, and Byakugou formation. You can handle the tree whispering. Deal?"

Tenzo put a hand on Sakura's shoulder. "Sakura?"

"Deal."

March 27

From: Sakura Haruno, Land of Honey

To: Itachi Uchiha, Land of Vegetables

Thank you for the tip on the footwork. You were right: the more stable stance made for better trunk production, and the roots went deeper. Kosuke sounds lovely, and a little bit scary. I had no idea toads could be so fond of fire. Echo is really enjoying the peanuts I gave her, so I put a little bag of them in her storage band. They're very fatty, so be careful how much she eats.

I have other news, relating to our mission. Not long after we left my family estate, Tenzo received a tip from the Hokage that someone matching White Zetsu's appearance was seen in the area. He left me behind in Honey with one of the security teams while he looked into it. The tip came out of a place called the Genjutsu Tree Village, which is in the middle of a jungle swamp in the aptly named Land of Swamps. There, Tenzo found evidence of genjutsu-producing trees. Locals have evidently learned to circumvent the trees' genjutsu by using chili peppers. When Tenzo listened to the trees, he discovered a shared chakra connection, and deduced that those trees are most likely offshoots that sprouted from a source tree. He took me along on a second trip to double our search output, but we weren't able to identify the source itself or its possible location due to the sheer size of the root system.

It could be a random, natural occurrence, but given how targeted the genjutsu was (it was limited to that specific village, and no more than half a mile in any direction of the village center) and the fact that he may have

been seen in the area, it might be Zetsu's handiwork. The Hokage was informed, and he may have already let Jiraiya know of its existence. If you do head that way, let me know what you find.

Itachi Uchiha (15)

Year 1, Month 7

Illusion

Before sighting the swamp, Itachi and Jiraiya smelled it: a dense, wet-wood odor that clung to the nostrils and sat heavy on the tongue. It was not a bad smell, in Itachi's opinion—Jiraiya did not agree—but it was ever-present, and blocked out everything else. Between the smell that overwhelmed human senses and the oppressive darkness, they had to locate Genjutsu Tree Village by other means: Kosuke scouted ahead, and hours later brought back news of a sharp, spicy scent concentrated in a single area. The three of them approached the target at a snail's pace; Itachi took point, his Sharingan focused on the path ahead, while Jiraiya followed and kept watch over their surroundings. Several times, they had to change course to avoid shinobi squads on patrol. Jiraiya taught Itachi a few simple seals on the fly—annoying traps, mainly, but also a template for storing chakra-based supplemental materials—emphasizing the importance of flexibility when using fuinjutsu on the go.

“You're not gonna find many writing desks waiting for you out in the wild,” Jiraiya said once Itachi was able to sketch out the letters to satisfaction. “So make sure you keep your penmanship nice and neat any way you can.”

It was much more difficult work than Itachi had first thought. The Sharingan's copying ability was actually a drawback in the art of fuinjutsu. Copying someone else's handwriting, as it were, never produced adequate results. General structure could be memorized, but

seals were personal and finicky; they needed the user's individual flourishes and style to work.

The farther they walked through the swamp, the more frustrated Itachi became. He could feel the genjutsu taking hold all around them, but his Sharingan was never able to locate a source for more than a few seconds at a time. Rather than depend on a single, centralized host to produce enough chakra for the genjutsu, these trees spread the task of accumulating chakra evenly amongst themselves. It was as Sakura had implied: these trees cooperated with one another like a single unit. Itachi wondered if he'd have been able to pin down the trees' ability with his Mangekyo; with his underdeveloped eyes, the chakra within the trees manifested as a dull glow that he might have written off as a natural, but unusually strong, life energy.

"The village is just ahead," Kosuke said. "Past this point, I was no longer able to counter the genjutsu without risking detection."

"Interesting." Jiraiya sank into a crouch, and studied the environment around them; he dipped a hand in the water, ran his fingers along a mossy patch of bark, and tugged at the vines weighing down the branches. "That peppery smell might be the reason why the village is able to live here. That, or they've developed natural adaptations. Anything else?"

"Yes." Kosuke blinked their huge, wet eyes and snapped up a newt that crawled too near their feet. "There were three travelers led by a high ranking guard, all four heading to the village. They spoke of the Akatsuki, though to what end, I do not know. Once they passed beyond this point, I heard no more."

"Odd. I didn't think the Land of Swamps had close relations with Ame. Any news of the one called White Zetsu?"

“No.”

“Worth a shot.” Jiraiya tapped Itachi in the forehead with a large, fan-shaped leaf picked up from the surrounding litter. “Pop quiz. What’s your read on the situation?”

“We should attempt to get closer.”

“Damn, you’re on fire today.”

Itachi glowered at an unrepentant Jiraiya, who continued taking note of the earth, wind, and sky around them.

“We know White Zetsu is likely to have been here,” Itachi said. “And given his plant-based techniques, it may be him controlling the trees. But even if the phenomenon is natural, the Akatsuki may be intensifying the effect or experimenting on how to control it or make it stronger. Not only that, but there may be other Akatsuki operatives in the area; if that’s the case, we also ought to hunt down local collaborators.”

“Now there’s an intelligent comment.”

Kosuke de-summoned himself, and Itachi and Jiraiya pressed on, occasionally sending jolts of chakra through skin-to-skin contact to ensure their countering jutsu sufficiently warded against the trees. But the assault intensified the closer they got to the village, and by the time they slipped into disguises and passed through the walls, Itachi had a pounding headache. It made avoiding the shinobi guards all the more difficult; it had been some time since he’d had to contend with constant pain in addition to the mission at hand. The fact that every shinobi they encountered was of high rank and skill didn’t help. It was odd: most villages, especially small ones such as this, might have

contained a handful of jounin-level troops, with chuunin and genin making up the vast majority. But every shinobi guard here had a dangerous look about them; the townsfolk, for their part, appeared strangely subdued, and every so often shot the guards worried looks that were not returned.

A small festival was being set up in the main square, where a booth had been set up specifically to sell eye-watering products containing the spicy chili whose smell permeated the air in town. Jiraiya purchased a bottle of hot oil and the two of them, at the salesperson's suggestion, applied a few drops to their upper lips. Immediately, Itachi's headache cleared. After tipping his hat down to avoid curious glances, he activated his Sharingan and found the subtle lines of chakra left by the genjutsu much easier to detect.

The investigation bore fruit once Jiraiya realized he could leverage Itachi's good looks to their benefit: a wooden toy merchant's daughter—a blushing, young blonde girl wearing a purple kimono—informed an uncomfortable Itachi that the village head's name was Kandachi. Itachi recognized the name from the Akatsuki bingo book; the man hailed from Ame and served as Hanzo's right-hand man up until the old salamander's death. Evidently, in this world he went on to become an informant for the Akatsuki, and rumor had it he'd outright become a member within the past several weeks.

After the lanterns were lit and the harvest festival began in earnest, Jiraiya and Itachi slipped out and made their way back to a more well-traveled town of around five thousand, five miles away. They took dinner in their room, and poured over what they had learned. Jiraiya had the Akatsuki bingo book out on the table, open to the two-page spread detailing all known and suspected information regarding Genjutsu Tree Village's clandestine leader.

“This Kandachi fellow...I've heard he already has experience in manipulating natural forces to apply techniques over a wide area. It would fit the profile, that's for sure.”

“He isn’t the only one within Akatsuki to use such techniques.” Orochimaru had done his research well, and was well aware of Nagato’s Rain Tiger technique that allowed him to monitor every movement within the storm’s range. “Pain is also known for widespread nature-based techniques.”

Jiraiya hummed thoughtfully. “True, true. I want to take another trip inside, but at this point, our best move is to lay low for a while. Depending on the limits of the tree genjutsu technique, we may have been clocked the second we busted through the front doors.”

“Where will we go next?”

“Land of Rivers. There’s supposedly an Akatsuki hideout thataways I want to look into. You can go ahead and tuck in. I have a few more things in town to take care of.”

A few more drinks to down or a few more women to enjoy, maybe. No matter. Itachi headed for the inn’s shared bathing area, intent on taking advantage of the silence with a solitary soak in the salt pools. But he cut his errand short when, halfway through removing his shirt, he felt himself being watched—so suddenly and so violently that he nearly stumbled. Whoever or whatever this presence was, it was *not* Jiraiya. Had Itachi been followed? Itachi, Sharingan blazing in the dark, crept out of the baths with the Sun Sword in one hand and a kunai in the other, all senses on high alert. Had they been followed from the Genjutsu Tree Village?

Itachi never found out. After forty-five minutes of creeping through the halls, darting from shadow to shadow as he hunted for the intruder, Itachi felt the presence vanish, as though its origin had simply blinked out of existence: one second there, the next...nothing. Not even a sensation of dying or flickering away. When he re-entered his suite, Itachi’s whole body trembled from the physical stress of remaining on high-alert for so long. He had no intention of lowering his guard, but at the very least he could see to some chores to calm his

mind. Chores were simple, repetitive tasks that would center his mind, and if the presence decided to make a return, perhaps it might get sloppy if it witnessed Itachi's affected placidity.

Itachi made for the cupboards in the hallway containing their bed things, only to see that the shelf holding their futons and pillows was empty. The hair on Itachi's arms stood up, and he realized, far later than he should have, that he had felt this presence before. He was no sensor and so could not identify the presence with confidence, but it was familiar all the same; whether he knew it from this world or the previous one, Itachi couldn't say. But he knew without a shred of doubt that he'd previously encountered this presence.

The short distance to the bedroom felt like walking through a sticky syrup, and Itachi found himself hoping, irrationally, that he would find Jiraiya waiting for him there, perhaps with a smirk and a quip about learning to relax or always checking his surroundings.

But Jiraiya was not in the bedroom. Someone else had been, though: there were two futons laid out and fully prepared with pillows, sheets, and brightly-patterned quilts in the local style turned down as though to welcome the room's occupants to bed. Itachi had no intention of going to sleep now, though; as though the beds were not enough of a scare, the intruder had left a most unusual message.

On Itachi's pillow were two wooden toys: a snake painted white, and a samurai helmet. Both sported crude carvings depicting the musical note used to identify Oto forces. The snake had been decapitated—the helmet, split in half. Lying next to them was a piece of paper. Itachi picked it up and read the rough handwriting:

Never got a proper thank you. So, you're welcome.

Signed—your Guardian Angel ;)

Itachi dropped the note in his pocket, and packed up their belongings in such haste that he didn't bother putting anything in its rightful place. He found Jiraya in the red light district; the elder ninja took one look at Itachi's ashen face and asked no questions when Itachi informed him they'd been followed. They ran south through the night, sending kage bunshin scattering in all directions, hoping to lose their tail through subterfuge and avoid the attention of a fight. For the next two days, he and Jiraiya moved erratically from tiny nation to tiny nation, sticking to borderlines and leaving enough trails to confuse even the best of trackers. The presence did not return.

Sakura Haruno (15)

Year 1, Month 8

Monotropa uniflora

The Senju were a large clan; their family tree—no pun intended—contained thousands of members that lived in scattered settlements across the Land of Fire and a few surrounding minor nations. The branch Hashirama led had been large, but was hardly the largest and far from the most influential; the Konoha branch of the Senju Clan, like the Uchiha Clan as a whole, were a militaristic group, with all the rigid hierarchy and established roles that came with such a structure. After establishing Konoha, Hashirama's branch melted into the fabric of Konoha's military forces, retaining their culture and customs but doing away with the internal organization, seeing as their clan head governed the city. Sakura herself was related to the Senju, and so were many other Konoha residents, from direct descendents like Tsunade to distant cousins like Ayame the ramen girl.

Other branches of the Senju remained insular depending on what power they wielded within the region. The branch living in the Land of Fire's capital city, for example, did not legally acknowledge children any less than three-quarters Senju—and required proof of

identity beyond that—due in no small part to the wealth and political influence they exerted upon the daimyo. Fewer members meant less divvying up of power, which meant more power to those lucky enough to find themselves in the inner circle.

It was on a hot July visit to the capital city that Sakura met some of those Senju in person. Just as Tsunade had done in Honey, the Senju patriarch sent a request for Sakura's presence in his home, a grand structure on the same street as the palace and several key government buildings. Tenzo spent the entire afternoon making hasty purchases of fine clothing so as not to embarrass Sakura in front of Matsutaro Senju, the patriarch in question and a highly conservative man in terms of adherence to decorum and rank.

Interestingly, though the arrival of guests to his home inspired much pomp and circumstances—the dinner alone had thirty courses—Matsutaro had little to say to Sakura herself other than to request she demonstrate her skills. Thinking the man might appreciate a more ostentatious trick, Sakura seeded her chakra within a decorative apple bonsai, prompting it to bloom.

He clapped when she finished, and chose that moment to convey snide remarks about the Fourth Hokage's constant blocking of most Senju attempts to communicate with Sakura directly. The statement gave Sakura pause. Save for Tsunade, there had been no similar requests to meet, and it wasn't until that very moment that Sakura realized how odd that had been. If Minato had been using his own influence to keep the Senju off of Sakura's back, that explained a great deal.

"He thinks we want to take advantage of your abilities, and use them for our own gain." Matsutaro selected a braised peacock tongue with ivory chopsticks, and examined the morsel with pride before devouring it. That one dish probably cost Sakura's wages for a week. "He claims we want to 'control' you. What a forward man he is."

It wasn't just Tsunade who was prone to biting back. "Do you want to

do those things, Lord Senju?” Next to her, Tenzo coughed. But Matsutaro merely smiled at the jibe.

“Of course I do,” the old man said. “So does everyone. So does that Hokage of yours. Do not think that your subsidized travels are meant to engender in you a feeling of independence, personal pride, or freedom. Your success means a great deal to Konoha. Like a tailed beast, you are a weapon to exploit. Remember that, and set aside some small part of your heart for you and you alone. The same hand that feeds you now may starve you later, if your obedience takes precedence over your happiness. You are allowed to grow, but only as the trellis of war guides you. Any whims, should they threaten the state, will be pruned. Have you been to the Heart of the Forest?”

Sakura fought the urge to find Tenzo’s eyes, to ask without words for comfort and calm. But in the panoptic surveillance of Matsutaro’s formal dining room—lined with guards and servants, and the table set for twenty-four—Sakura knew she could not shy away. The eyes of so many were upon her, within and without, and her options were limited if she wanted to keep what little clout she had. Offend the wrong person, pay tribute to an even wronger person, and, as Matsutaro said, whatever stuck out would get pruned. Sakura pined for the relative simplicity of her first year in this world, and the way she had been protected from the messiness of political intrigue.

“No,” Sakura said. Best to keep things brief. “I have not, Lord Senju.”

“You will.” It was Tenzo Matsutaro looked at, not Sakura. “You will.”

Itachi Uchiha (16)

Year 1, Month 10

Innovation

“I’m going to teach you a new technique,” Jiraiya said without warning one day. They were somewhere between Wind and Earth, hobbling along the most poorly maintained road Itachi had ever seen. This land contained a whole lot of nothing, which made it fertile ground for conversation and, it seemed, impromptu teaching. “Not a seal this time. It’s called the Rasengan. I’m not going to ask you about shape transformation, since you’re a smartass who already knows everything. What is the Ransengan? You tell me.”

“It involves spinning chakra in multiple directions, contained within a single, spherical point of contact with the user. The Fourth Hokage and his son combine their wind nature with the technique. Kakashi attempted to combine the technique with his lightning nature and failed but produced chidori as a result.”

“One of these days I’ll ask you a question and you’ll be knocked flat on your ass.”

“I apologize for knowing the answer to your question, sensei.”

Jiraiya’s smile, while more than a little feral, was nonetheless genuine.

“You know what? I’ll make a bet with you, smart guy. I have a very important errand to run that’ll take me from your side for seven whole days—please hold your tears until the end—and here’s what I want you to do in the meantime:” Jiraiya tossed Itachi a small scroll. It was a little thing, small enough that the paper, when unfurled, wasn’t even the length of a man’s forearm. “This scroll contains instructions on how to create the Rasengan. On paper, it’s incredibly simple. You make the chakra move, you concentrate it, yadda yadda. The devil’s in the technical details. So here’s my bet: you work on that technique while I’m gone. If you can produce a Rasengan—just the basics, no combining it with your nature—for five straight seconds without the

thing falling apart, then I'll take you to the capital city in the Land of Lightning and reserve us a spot at the fanciest tea house in the whole damn country. They've got slices of cake that cost what a genin makes in a day. How about that?"

"Deal."

They shook on it, and Jiraiya took off, leaving Itachi...stranded in the middle of a rocky desert. Of course. The next town wasn't all that far, and Itachi entered the resort to find that Jiraiya had paid for rooms in advance. It *was* Uchiha money, but the gesture was still nice. What was even nicer was Jiraiya's reaction when he returned seven days later to find that Itachi had managed not only to produce a Rasengan, but also to keep it steady for two seconds. Time-wise, Itachi was off by a mile; shape manipulation had never really been his thing in the first place, and the Rasengan went against everything the Uchiha stood for in terms of the shinobi arts. The Rasengan wanted precision, simplicity, and finesse. The Uchiha could do finesse, but they were going to do it while lighting everything on fire and screaming about it.

And yet Itachi *had* produced a Rasengan in spite of all that. Jiraiya congratulated him, sincerely, and did not hide how impressed he was with what Itachi had accomplished. It still unnerved Itachi, being on the receiving end of praise. His family here were encouraging enough, but Itachi could not remember being acknowledged by someone as powerful as Jiraiya—with a smile and a wink, of all things. Honestly, he'd expected more eye-rolling. But that was Jiraiya for you: he said one thing, did another, and did a third thing in secret, after you'd brushed him off and looked away.

Jiraiya did not take him to the fanciest tea house in all the Land of Lightning. That wasn't the deal they'd made. But the wager had not mentioned the *second* fanciest tea house in all the Land of Lightning, and when they got there, Jiraiya let him pick out whatever he wanted.

Itachi (16) & Sakura (15)

Year 1, Month 12

Land of Meadows

Kusa was a brutal place to live. The city sat in the center of a vast prairie, which was itself located between mountain ranges and battling storm fronts. Consequently, the hidden village got the worst of damn near every natural disaster. Everything was fair game: tornadoes, flash floods, hailstorms, heat waves, ice storms, blizzards, earthquakes, and anything else all of nature wanted to throw at them. Nevertheless, the people of the Land of Meadows remained, and so did their hidden village. They built their houses sturdy, their shinobi sturdier, and treasured one another with the fierceness of a people accustomed to having everything they owned taken away in an instant.

It was raining the day Itachi and Sakura crossed paths for the first time in a full year; for a few moments, all they did was stare at one another, taking in the new growth—both physical differences and the unseen ones conveyed solely within their letters. Itachi had grown another two inches. His shoulders were broader, and his waist slimmer by comparison. His face was starting to slim out and take on that fine-boned, aristocratic structure Sakura remembered. Sakura hadn't gotten any taller, but she'd started filling out her clothes a bit more; the awkwardness of adolescence was finally going away, leaving curves and soft skin in its wake. Both of them felt a little shy. Nobody had poured their heart out in the letters, exactly, but they'd built up a comfortable familiarity with one another on paper that had never existed in person. Now here they were face to face, and all that familiarity had to go somewhere.

Sakura made the first move: a hug she cut off a little too late to be proper, but one she meant every bit of. Itachi hugged her back. While their teachers conversed, the odd couple took to the streets, arms linked to stay dry under the small umbrella. Echo clung to Sakura's right shoulder, the solid weight of the bird acting as a counterbalance

with Itachi's presence on her left side. The outdoor market was in full swing, with crowds of people bustling in one direction around the circular plaza. The scent of burning grass hung in the air; a wildfire had broken out a few miles from town, but between the rain and strict observance of controlled burns, the fire fizzled out before it ate up more than a few acres. Patches of blackened, sweet-smelling tallgrasses, now bowed over from the rain, dotted the rolling hills Sakura caught glimpses of between the buildings.

Itachi broke the stillness between them. "What are you thinking about?"

Sakura ran a finger along a low wall, picking up light-gray fragments of ash that dissolved under her touch. Echo lifted off and soared overhead, careless of the rain, which had dwindled to a sprinkle.

"Tenzo took me here in the spring, when they burn the land on purpose. It's to clear out all the dead things so they don't pile up and cause an uncontrolled wildfire. People do that in the forest, too. It's strange. I never thought about fire as anything other than a necessary evil: something we need to make food and water safer, and to keep warm when it's cold, but still a force of destruction."

"You don't feel that way anymore?"

"No. Fire isn't even a neutral force in nature. It's good for it. It takes away the dead things, leaves behind fertilizer, and gives a lot of plants a chance to grow that they might not otherwise have had. Some animals, too, depend on fire. There's a bird out here that evolved to bury its eggs beneath a pile of decaying plant matter that it lights on fire to keep the eggs warm. It maintains the fire in a way that incubates the eggs at the correct temperature. Isn't that crazy?"

"Seems like it would be easier to sit on them."

“Well, if there’s another thing I’ve learned, it’s that evolutionary biology does whatever works, not whatever makes the most sense from our perspective. Survival is about adaptation and biological compromise.” Sakura gave Itachi a once-over. He looked calm, and she hoped he enjoyed her company. “What are you thinking about?”

Itachi held a hand out from under the umbrella, and watched the rain collect in his palm.

“How it always rained in Ame, even when it wasn’t supposed to. Pain’s technique, coupled with the Rinnegan, allowed his sensory abilities to stretch for miles. I always wondered where all the water came from, and what became of Ame’s ecosystem—whether it adapted, or if it would’ve fallen apart given enough time. Flooding was a persistent issue.”

“You always have such interesting things to say.”

“I find your conversation more compelling.”

“That’s because I’m the smartest person in the world.” Sakura put her nose in the air, but Itachi knew she was only playing, and held her closer.

“What does the smartest person in the world want to buy at the market today?”

“Oh, that’s easy.” Leading Itachi on an erratic path, Sakura crossed rows of human traffic to get to a stand covered in handmade soaps. She pointed at a pyramid of fabric-covered squares in the center. “Felted soap,” she said. “They wrap the bar soap with wool, and it’s

like a washcloth and soap all in one. And it smells incredible. I could never decide on just one scent; I'd want them all. But there's no way I could actually use the stuff since we're supposed to avoid scented products while we're in the field. If I use Echo to take it home, I know I'll just buy a shitload of soap I don't need. It's tragic."

"Truly." Itachi glanced over Sakura's shoulder. Jiraiya stood off in the distance, leaning up against the wall of a barn, watching them. "Seems like I should be going."

Sakura did not make an effort to hide her disappointment. Now that she'd had a full year of training, traveling, and journaling under belt, the very notion of hiding sadness to save face around Itachi sounded impossibly childish. She stepped close enough to catch the attention of a few nosey grannies the next stall over, and angled her body away from Jiraiya.

"So, other than the snake and the helmet, did you hear or see anything else from—from our anonymous friend?"

Itachi shook his head, and there they parted, with promises to write more often. Sakura made the walk back to the rented cottage alone, already fantasizing about hot baths and face masks as she shook the rainwater out of the umbrella and sat it on the ground open to dry. She'd just removed her outer layer when she felt something heavy brush up against her thigh. In the pocket of her skirt, someone had placed a handwritten receipt and a bar of felted soap: goat's milk and honey, unscented.

Sakura picked it up, held it to her chest, and smiled.

Chapter End Notes



LONG note incoming.

Let's talk fandom etiquette. Because there's been a couple Incidents, but this is a problem throughout fandom in general.

Putting unsolicited criticism into the comments is rude. Perhaps you mean well. But still, it's rude. I deleted the most recent round of critical comments because they were truly some of the most tone deaf remarks I have ever received (like COMICAL levels of self-centeredness), but I want to walk you through the experience. Imagine: you're an artist. Someone sees you painting, comes up to your easel and says the following: "Oh, it's this again. You know, when I passed by the last time, I really hated your painting. Which is weird because I LOVE paintings about time travel, but yours just pissed me off for some reason? I forgot why. So I'm coming back to give you another chance to prove your art is worthwhile! Okay, gosh, I keep seeing things I don't like. Well, that little part there is good. But I'm just not sold on this painting! There's probably some other people that might like it, but overall it's kind of a letdown for me and I'm not going to buy it."

Imagine getting excited about the ao3 email in your inbox, clicking through, and seeing TEN comments like this. I pointed out to this person, quite bluntly, that they were being an egotistical dickhead; miraculously, they apologized and removed themselves from the premises without my having to get out a garden hose.

Why don't we like unsolicited criticism? Because critical comments often come across as conceited, just like the only-slightly-exaggerated example above. They carry this air of assumption that the commenter knows what's objectively best for

the story and that it's the author's duty to satisfy them. Consider: I don't owe any reader a story that they will like. I'm not obligated to reassure you when a plot point makes you anxious. I'm not obligated to "sell" anyone this story. It simply exists. It is not for you as an individual, and you are not paying me to make it. You either have to (1) trust me, (2) wait until it's all done, or (3) stop reading. Have you SEEN how many Nardo fics there are on this site alone? Surely one will fit your exacting parameters for good fic. Or write your own.

Anxious comments only create more anxiety. "I'm not so sure about X," "I don't think X really makes sense," "X isn't working for me," "X feels kind of off," "I hope you aren't going to X," and other such remarks lack self-awareness of one's place as a reader. I've known authors to abandon works or entire fandoms over repeated instances of comments like this. Cut that shit out. Fanfic writers are doing this for free, for fun, for community; this isn't Kirkus Reviews. Also, fanfiction is transformative. Not only am I aware that X or Y incident wouldn't happen in canon, I'm COUNTING on it.

As for wanting the story to follow real-world logic all the time...this is not CinemaSins. Literary devices and tropes are what give fiction life. There are going to be bits of fiction that do not meet the standards of reality, and may have no intention of ever doing so, even if they're nestled in with things that are realistic. If you want cold hard realism all the way to the core, you must step outdoors.

If reading this note has made you more anxious in general about commenting, that's understandable. Not knowing what to comment or being afraid of causing offense is So Real. But the solution to these problems isn't worship or silence—it's taking another look at how your comment might be interpreted on the other end. Ask yourself, 'Am I airing frustrations? Is this about me and my preferences?' If the answer to either of those is yes, reevaluate. The only acceptable anxiousness to throw my way is if you have a specific psychological trigger and you want a yes/no confirmation from me if it's something that will come up. This can be done through DM, on tumblr, at guiltyfandomtrashwonderland. That's it. You can get spicy! You can get sassy! But don't get selfish.

The most common defensive response from readers when faced with this feedback goes something like, "So what, you just want

people to say only nice things all the time?” And if that is your reaction, I say: (1) you may, perhaps, be a person who does this kind of thing if defensiveness is your gut reaction, and (2) uhhhhhhhhh yes. Lol. Having fun and making friends and tailoring your interests to astonishingly exacting standards is part of the Fandom Experience. “Good things” does not equal adulation. Just be nice. This is my house. You are a visitor. We are going to be kind to one another. If my wallpaper is offending you, then leave my house. And don’t even think about recommending me a different wallpaper on your way out.

PS: this timely post I saw on tumblr -->

Reader, save a bookmark!

Notes

The creator's summary is added automatically. Plain text with limited HTML.

AUTHORS CAN READ EVERYTHING YOU TYPE IN HERE.

5000 characters left

Your tags

The creator's tags are added automatically.


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Comma separated, 100 characters per tag

Add to collections

Yep! You guessed it! Here too!

☐ Private bookmark ☐ Rec

 To keep your opinions to yourself? Make the bookmark private. Authors don't want to read about your dislike of plot, grammar, or rating of the fic. Thanks. <3

Create

I wanted the knowledge I don't have yet

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, Itachi curb stomps a guy while Jiraiya takes a shaky flip phone video of the beatdown, which he will later upload to WorldStarHipHop

Chapter Notes

GUESS WHAT. I FINISHED THIS STORY.

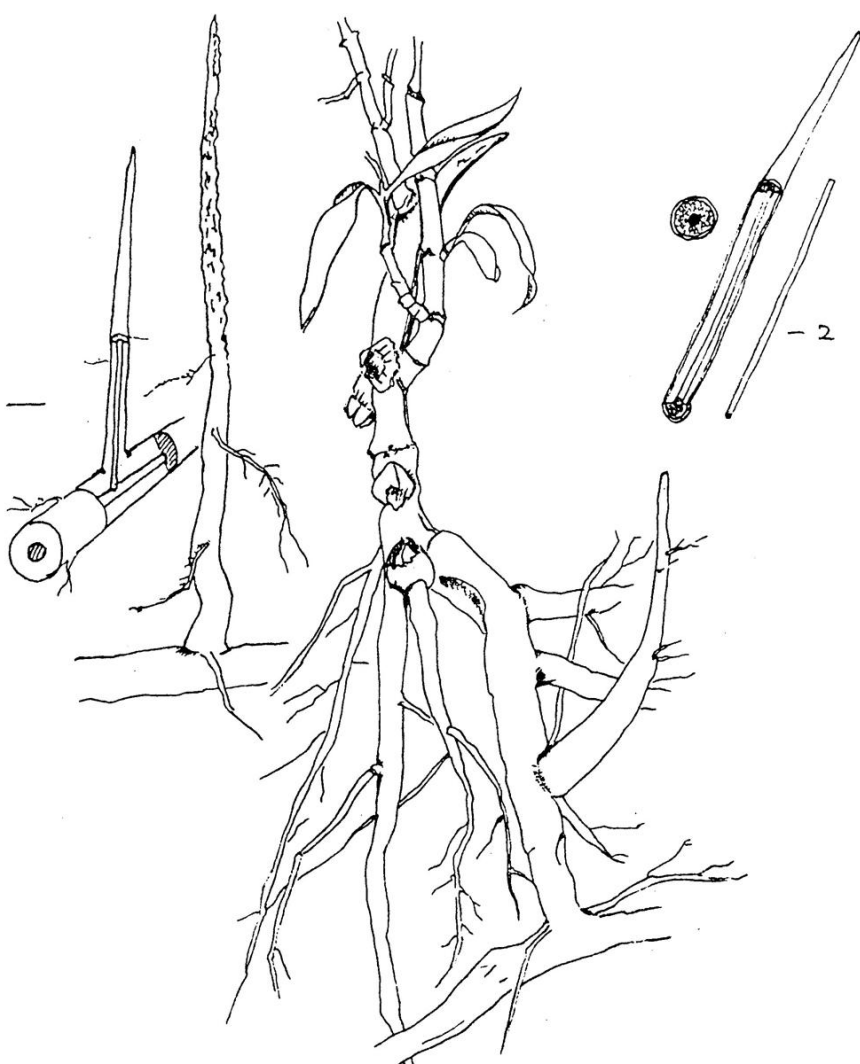
Note: “Nephew” here is used as a general familial term for a younger male relative.

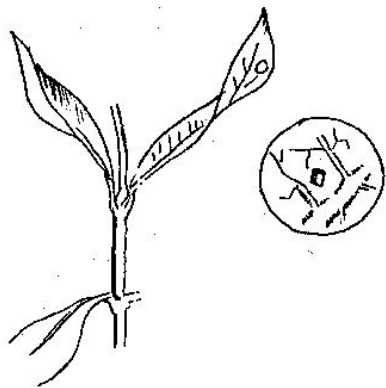
CW: mentions of canonical suicide & suicide baiting

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

1 —

— 2





Avicennia marina

White mangrove

The white mangrove is a tree growing anywhere from 3 to 14 meters high,

with exposed roots and twisty branches. The leaves are egg-shaped. The bark is smooth and light brownish-gray. Found mainly in the Land of Wind's southern coastal regions, in an environment known as sabkha: coastal salt flats that I would never have thought could host plant life more complex than the hardiest microflora. These trees live in saltwater with poor oxygen levels, but they don't wither and die like most other plants would. Their exposed roots are called pneumatophores, and their purpose is to acquire oxygen from the air since the soil is waterlogged and possesses low oxygen. In terms of salt, the white mangrove directs the salt into the leaves, where it is expelled through pores. Sometimes, a certain leaf is saltier than others and gets sacrificed for the good of the whole tree. When I licked a few leaves, they were all salty. I tried using the mokuton to manipulate the speed at which it processes salt, and boy howdy it did not like that. It did like when I helped it grow some new roots to replace a few that got hit by big hailstones, though. Still working on the byakugou. It eats up nature chakra like nobody's business, but it doesn't feel right once it's in there. It's all...wiggly. It doesn't just sit.

November 18

From: Itachi Uchiha, Land of Birds

To: Sakura Haruno, Land of Fire

I received your letter and package today; I am glad to know your training is progressing well, and I look forward to any updates on storing nature chakra. After some weeks of effort, I was able to produce a stable Rasengan with no ill effects. The humor of the situation does not escape me; never would I have thought to be in a situation to learn this technique, and from Jiraiya the Toad Sage of all people. My next steps are to attempt imbuing the technique with a fire nature. As you may imagine, there is a huge risk of catastrophic burns should the technique fail, just as there is a risk of microtears in an unstable wind-based Rasengan. I am taking all experimentation slowly, since you are not available to mend my mistakes. I do not intend to include this technique in my regular repertoire, as its nature is contrary to my typical methods of combat, but it will be useful as a training exercise.

My work with seals continues. I am learning that there is much more to fuinjutsu than what the surface reveals. Rather than begin with fundamentals and progressing to application, those who wish to master fuinjutsu start by learning fully complete, intricate seals that require little personal development, such as summoning. Summoning seals are complex, but summoners draw upon an existing seal network; they don't develop a new seal every time they summon. The same cannot be said for most other seals, which is precisely the reason why true fuinjutsu masters are so rare. The level of philosophical thought required for success is staggering. Intent, interpersonal awareness, and perspective are everything.

To illustrate the point, Jiraiya instructed me to create a seal that would compel a target to remain within its borders. I drew upon the library of characters he taught me and inscribed them within the circle: ensnare, control, thought, obey, remain, perimeter, and so on went in the center rings, while the outermost ring contained a more specific directive: the one who stands within this circle cannot step out of it. Jiraiya then entered the seal and allowed me to activate it. Seconds later, he left the circle—not with a step, but with a jump. It gave me much to think about. I return to storage seals when my mind tires. By comparison, they are laughably simple. I keep the Sun Sword in a seal on my left wrist, and it has come in handy on many occasions.

When you spoke of feeling like a spectator in this world, I concluded that I feel the same. Even though it has been over a year since we came to this place, I have never felt immersed. It is like watching a play where the characters on stage do not know the audience exists, except for me and you. We know we are being watched, by the anonymous friend, the Sage of Six Paths, or some other entity.

There is no escape from detachment some days; though I do everything in my power to treat my family well, I know that they see my indifference and wonder at its origin. Their confusion makes everything so much worse. I cannot tell them, and yet I cannot wear a mask of normality well enough to lift their concerns.

I have attached a large seed from an unusual tree I discovered in a valley. The locals claim that this species of tree grows nowhere else, having long

gone extinct elsewhere on the continent. Something about the microclimate in this valley nourishes the tree in a way other environments have failed. Perhaps you will uncover its secrets, and make it grow where it does not belong.

Itachi Uchiha (16)

Year 2, Month 3

Interrogation

It was a funny thing, the red thread of fate. People said it bound together those destined to meet and fall in love, or at least be joined in matrimony. Even if it wasn't true—and Itachi was beginning to accept that such things *could* be true—it was a lovely sentiment about the way everyone had someone ready to love them. Or it was a horrifying sentiment about the way that one's free will did not exist. Were there other threads of fate, ones that had nothing to do with love but everything to do with inescapable connection? Threads of tragedy, of rivalry, of hatred? As he looked down at Deidara, a young man with wings severed, chakra drained, and movement arrested by a toad's tongue, Itachi had to wonder.

"I'm going to ask you a few questions about your organization," Itachi said. "I don't suppose you feel like providing them in advance."

"Fuck you," Deidara spat. He hadn't gone down easy. Between Jiraiya and Itachi, killing Deidara would have been a simple errand: there and done, with plenty of down time until their next target. Capturing Deidara alive and well enough to speak had taken nearly half an hour of pitched battle.

"You aren't happy with them." Itachi smoothed his voice, invoking velvet in opposition to Deidara's bitter defiance. "They caught you and

forced you to follow their rules. You seek freedom and recognition of your talent. Does your fear of your Leader outweigh your dedication to artistic vision? You think your art reflects a single moment, and here you are up to your neck in a proverbial tar pit. How much farther will you sink before you go under and everyone forgets you ever existed? What sort of legacy is that to leave behind?"

True fear passed over Deidara's face. But it was gone again in an instant, replaced by blind fury.

"You don't know *shit* about me, you inbred fuck. Don't fucking look at me like I'm nothing."

Jiraiya shifted his weight. "He might still have a few tricks up his sleeve, kid. Careful."

Itachi activated his Sharingan, allowing the red to bleed across his irises slow enough for the human eye to catch. The performance mattered: the promise of a slow death loosened tongues; a quick death silenced them. Rather unwisely, but not unexpectedly, Deidara held his gaze. With Jiraiya keeping watch, Itachi took a deep breath and pulled Deidara into a genjutsu.

The location was familiar, if only to Itachi: a shrine, its western wall collapsed into rubble; Deidara, sweat-soaked and bruised at its base; Itachi, standing on top, the sunset casting its corona around his head and obscuring all but a pair of glowing red eyes. In the other world, Itachi had ensnared a young Deidara in this very trap in order to conscript him. Deidara would not have known the significance, but Itachi was willing to gamble that who Deidara was at his core had not changed.

"Without artistic merit, what are you other than an inconvenience? The Tsuchikage didn't want you. Your former comrades didn't want

you. You have nothing to recommend you but your art. But what good is an artist who doesn't truly create?"

Deidara roared at Itachi like an animal, but the clay birds he sent flying fizzled out midair in a burst of black flame. Another Itachi appeared from behind a pillar, leaning against it with exaggerated disregard.

"No Ultimate Art today? Or haven't you completed the technique to use it? You can't even create C4 yet, can you? Perhaps I should've been granted a percentage of your commissions all that time, since my defeat of you was so inspiring. Which tailed beast were you sent to collect? The three-tails is still with its host. The five-tails? Is Sasori here, too?"

The fear returned to Deidara's eyes, growing with each taunt, and did not leave. "Who the fuck *are* you? How do you know these things?"

The smile on Itachi's face was a small, dying thing: dry to the point of dessication. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"I'm not telling you shit, anyway."

"There's no need. You told me everything in the other room."

Deidara gasped, choked, and Itachi released the threads binding the genjutsu. Like a catapult shot gone horribly wrong, the illusion gave way, folding in on itself, and the fragments of Deidara's consciousness snapped violently back together. It was a neat little trick Itachi learned under Obito's tutelage. Most people favored brute force when using genjutsu for interrogation, but that only worked as well as torture did—which was to say, it didn't. Instead of forcing the information out under duress, the better method involved gentle

coaxing and simulated empathy. Split the mind in two, Obito said: converse with one half, taunt the other as a distraction. No one ever saw it coming. This technique had no name; Obito had never given it one, and Itachi saw no reason to fix what wasn't broken. In some ways, that namelessness made it all the more terrifying.

When Itachi returned to the waking world, Deidara had gone limp in the toad's grasp. He did not plead, and he did not cry. There was nothing in his eyes now, not even hatred.

"And they call me a monster...when there's demons like *you* walking around." Deidara bit his lip, hard. Blood ran down from his mouth, and the muscles on his face slackened. "I hope whoever finally kills you takes their fucking time."

Deidara's body seized, convulsed, and then he was gone, sliding limp onto the ground after Jiraiya released him from the toad with a flick of a wrist.

"Shit." Jiraiya poked the body with a sandaled foot. "Not even a plea bargain?"

Itachi knelt down and rested a hand on Deidara's chest. The body was still warm.

"Some things never change."

December 24

From: Sakura Haruno, Land of Hot Water

To: Itachi Uchiha, Land of Wind

I've done a lot of thinking. Mostly about regrets, even though I know I should learn to let things go. But this is one thing I don't want to put off anymore. Do you remember that night after what happened in the safehouse, when we were cleared from the hospital? You must remember, since I treated you so poorly. I spoke about trust, and in response you tried to tell me what happened regarding the Uchiha Incident. I shut you down before you could say anything. I said it didn't matter, but it does matter—not for the sake of sating my own curiosity, but because it matters to you, and you matter to me. When we see one another in person again, I'd like to have that conversation, and I promise this time that I will listen. You don't need to respond to any of this. I just wanted to let you know.

The tea in the attached parcel was grown and processed here in the Land of Hot Water. Their Secretary of Tourism insists that tea leaves from Hot Water are better quality than those from the Land of Tea. I will leave the verdict to your personal judgment, as I understand you have become quite the connoisseur owing to the gifts my grandmother sends to you. The lavender I added to the blend came from a plant that I grew myself. I hope it isn't too bitter.

Sakura Haruno (15)

Year 2, Month 5

Ficus altissima

Writing Itachi the letter taxed Sakura to her emotional limit. Sending it had been a study in torture. But Sakura was through fretting over Itachi's past, and knew better than to believe she might one day forget the entire thing. For two years she'd weighed the options in her mind, and in the end there was no doubt about it: she *did* want to know. Even if she hated the answer, and even if objective confirmation was impossible, she wanted to know. At this point, she did not question

Itachi's friendship or deny her reciprocation. For that reason alone, he deserved a chance to explain himself. And she would listen, as promised, no matter how hard it was.

Sakura spent another straight week stewing over the impending conversation, sullyng with her anxiety what would have otherwise been a pleasant visit to Konoha. It got so bad that Tenzo sent her home early, after she sprouted and subsequently withered the fifth orchid in a row. Halfway to the family estate, Sakura stopped in the middle of the street as a thought slammed into her mind like a stampede of wildebeest.

Sakura didn't *have* to rely solely on Itachi for information...did she? She wanted to hear his perspective. Absolutely. One hundred percent. But if this world had avoided an Uchiha Massacre, couldn't that mean it had *almost* happened, and then didn't? If that were the case, that meant somebody, somewhere had answers. Multiple somebodies. All Sakura had to figure out was how to get that information. If there was something on the Uchiha end of things, the clan itself had that information. But although her presence in the Uchiha District was not noteworthy these days, somebody would take umbrage if she started helping herself to private papers. She needed help. Who could she trust?

That question, at least, had a definite answer. She found said answer in the cramped, shared student office at the hospital, hunched over a desk in the low light even though there was a lamp *right there*.

"Sasuke."

"Hey."

"There's something I want to look into. Help me?"

“I’m almost through perfecting this defib technique. Give me a couple days?”

“I want to sneak into your clan’s restricted archives and snoop around. Somebody told me there was this thing that almost killed your entire clan, and nobody’s talking.”

“Give me five minutes.”

Getting into the archives was easy. Sasuke led Sakura to an unobtrusive structure on the outskirts of the compound and the attendant barely gave them a nod. Accessing the high-security sections was another matter. Sensitive materials were held in a climate-controlled storage area only accessible to archivists. In order to get at the good stuff in an official capacity, Sakura or Sasuke would’ve needed a signature from Fugaku and at least three council members. They had zero.

That was where Sasuke came in. While Sakura chatted up the head archivist and his assistants, Sasuke slipped into the storage room to find their quarry. If he got caught, his punishment would doubtless be less severe. But Sasuke did not get caught, and so their plan proceeded exactly as planned, with nary a snag in sight.

So they thought.

Sasuke deposited the requested boxes in a stuffy, private reading room, hissing at Sakura to be careful as she gently opened the dusty lid. Her touch left clear marks in the years of accumulated dirt.

“What are we looking for?”

“That’s the problem,” Sakura hissed back. “I kind of don’t know. I just have an approximate time range, and the rest is speculation all the way down.”

“Fuck. But you said it was big, right? Almost-killing-the-clan is big stuff. It’s not going to be just on one...document...” Sasuke trailed off.

“What?” Sakura put a hand on Sasuke’s shoulder. He didn’t answer. “Sasuke, what’s wrong?”

Face white as a sheet, Sasuke leveled a shaking finger at the box Sakura had opened. Inside, perched neatly atop the collection of miscellaneous paper documents, was an envelope. Addressed to one Sakura Haruno. Sakura felt faint as her heartbeat kicked into overdrive.

“Anyone could’ve put that there,” she said.

“Did you tell anyone you were going to be here today?”

“Maybe the archivist overheard us and put it there. Or maybe it’s the person who—well, someone’s been following us. Your brother and me. Probably the same person from the exams. It’s fine.”

“Sakura...”

“They’ve been helping us. They can’t be all bad. Just a sort of—strange benefactor. That’s all. It’s fine. It’ll be fine.”

Her hands and chest felt cold, tight. Ignoring Sasuke’s protestations, Sakura reached into the box and picked up the envelope. She lifted the flap and extracted the paper, slow as a slug in a snowstorm, every movement laborious and deliberate.

To find the answers you seek, return to the house that built you. Feel free to renovate; the bones are long gone, but their owners wouldn’t mind if you helped yourself. You might need to knock down a few walls first. Maybe going back to your roots will help you?

Signed—your Anonymous Friend ;)

A crumbly house. A trap door. A dark tunnel, and an earthen cave. Roots stretching across the walls, poking out through the floors. A warm feeling that bloomed in her chest, tying her inexorably to this world’s destiny.

The kissing house.

Sakura sprinted the whole way to the Uchiha safehouse, past the wall and through the forests surrounding the village. She crossed paths with no one, with only Sasuke bearing witness to her frantic push for answers. Though she recognized the dangerous extent of her foolhardiness, she forged ahead. The admonishment she’d given herself after the chuunin exams fell to pieces in the face of her damnable curiosity. She wanted answers. She *needed* answers.

‘Careless’ was how she’d originally framed it for Itachi. That was then, though. Here she was now, two years stronger and wiser, and this trip down the rabbit hole wouldn’t be with her eyes shut. She knew her limitations better than she ever had, and the safehouse basement was full of plant life big and small to lend her a helping hand. They would be her eyes and ears in the darkness, poking into nooks and crannies that the Uchiha, now reoccupying the house and using it for document storage, had missed with their sharp, red eyes. Whatever or whoever she found, Sakura was going to see this damn thing through to the end.

Sasuke gave up trying to talk sense into her halfway there, though he stayed by her side, preferring the chance of injury over the shame of tattling. Just as he had at the archives, he lent his presence to Sakura as a sort of get-in-free card; no one stopped her from leaping through the trap door, and when she got a few funny looks after hugging a root segment wider than her torso, Sasuke diverted the lookers’ attention with a monotonous, “Plant stuff.”

“Well?” Sasuke muttered once they ducked out of sight.

Sakura listened, and examined the basement the way a plant would: light, heat, soil composition, nutrition, competition, space: empty and filled. There was the cavern, full of light and air which the roots avoided, the darker tunnels the roots constantly fought to retake, and two rooms—the rooms the Uchiha had uncovered and opened up during the initial cleanup. But wait...there was a third—a third room tucked in between them.

“Let’s go,” she whispered. “First room on the left.”

The room that Sakura and Itachi conferred in before the chuunin exams had been converted into a weapons storage facility. Specialized shelving now held various swords, knives, bows, staffs, and all manner of deadly objects. While Sasuke kept watch, Sakura crawled on the floor like a bug, sending feelers of chakra through the earth, letting

the plants do the scouting for her. The entrance to the sealed room was just beyond a rack on the southernmost wall; getting to it would, indeed, require some renovation.

The roots undulated at her suggestion, and nudged a floor-to-ceiling assortment of glaives off of its feet and to the side; behind it, the earthen wall looked the same as the rest of them. But the plants knew better, and so did Sakura. A bit more nudging, and a bit of pressure, and the wall collapsed to reveal a rounded opening: a doorway leading to a small room, dimly lit by a hole in the ceiling that appeared to run all the way to the surface.

There was no furniture here, no artifacts or scrolls, and no footprints on the packed earth floor. Was the mysterious friend an earth chakra user? Or had this room already been known to them?

“Sakura. There.”

She looked. The envelope in the center of the room was immediately recognizable as the same sort used by the Hokage to store sensitive documents. A large, official wax seal on the front was a dead giveaway, but the true nature of the envelope hid itself; the paper was treated with chakra so that the person opening them had to follow a specific sequence of actions, or else the contents would disintegrate upon removal. Sakura had opened hundreds of them at Tsunade’s request. At her own request, she opened this one, the threat of capital punishment for the breach in security far from her mind. Inside was a single sheet of paper, previously folded, signed by Fugaku, and dated October 31st of the year Naruto was born.

Lord Hokage,

I thank you on behalf of the Uchiha Clan for allowing your discovery to come to light. It saddens all of us to know that a Sharingan user bore

responsibility for unleashing the Nine-Tailed Fox that night, even if his actions were the result of a compulsive curse seal. That he managed to overpower the curse seal just long enough to assist in your resealing efforts brings us great pride, and we thank you again for sharing this news with all the world. Should this critical information have been left out of the report, I do not doubt that relations between the Uchiha Clan and the people of Konoha would have continued to sour, perhaps past some horrible breaking point.

It is the latter concern that compels me to send you this message, though my thanks are nonetheless genuine. As you know, certain members of my clan have been critical of the village in an outspoken way that borders on treason. For some years now, these instigators found many receptive ears within our walls, owing to the poor treatment the Uchiha have suffered ever since the patriarch Madara made his stand against the First. However, the revelations following the Fox's attack and the subsequent brightening in relations with the village at large meant that the instigators lost all internal support. For a time, they continued to air their grievances openly, but precious few heeded their discontent, and they became pariahs among us.

Their protests continued in private until this previous week, at which time their complaints ended abruptly. Now quite suspicious, I and a few of my trusted advisers began an internal investigation in secret. Nothing good comes of sudden silence. My instincts rewarded me with the following information, uncovered by my nephew Shisui Uchiha within his role as ANBU operative, and which I am compelled to share with you for diplomatic as well as humanitarian reasons: Danzo Shimura has, for some time, conspired to overthrow your administration—and that of your predecessor—to install himself as Hokage. He intended to use the Uchiha's resentment of Konoha's Senju-influenced government to stir up support within the clan for a coup, and, with the current administration thus distracted by the conflict and ensuing peace negotiations, he planned to assassinate you and your allies, blame the deaths on the Uchiha, and destroy us to a man, once and for all.

You will find the evidence required to act upon this information in the usual places. Should additional evidence need to be found to satisfy your administration, then I will make it happen. There are those among us more susceptible to suggestion than others. The Uchiha Clan lends its full support

for further investigation, and once again thanks you for your contribution to ensuring our clan's happiness and wellbeing.

Fugaku Uchiha

Uchiha Clan Head

The names of several high-ranking, now-deceased Uchiha followed.

Sasuke reached for her in the gloom; she held him back just as tight.

“What does it mean? Was my dad selling people out just to get the village off our backs? Or does this mean—what the *hell*. Was this letter always here, and this guy knew about it, or—?”

What did it mean? Everything. Nothing.

“I don’t know, Sasuke. I don’t know.”

Itachi Uchiha (17)

Year 2, Month 9

Evolution

Jiraiya was ecstatic. The intelligence Itachi ripped from every corner of Deidara’s mind went on to produce countless leads—so many that the two of them couldn’t possibly investigate them all. The Fourth, during one of Jiraiya’s rare visits home, shook Itachi’s hand and

personally thanked him for his contribution to national security. By way of Deidara, Konoha identified and cleared thirteen safe houses, flushed out nine moles, and secured tens of millions in laundered money in the Land of Fire alone. Information relating to other nations' interests was buried, manipulated, sold off, or given 'freely' depending on current diplomatic relations.

Konoha also confirmed the state of Ame's economy, between the information in Deidara's head and on his person in written form: Sakura's economic destabilization plan, which had always been a tense talking point within village leadership, had succeeded in promoting civil unrest and economic recession within the Land of Storms, to the point where Ame had to borrow money from neighboring countries at sky-high interest rates. The Land of Honey sent a delegation brimming with gifts as a 'thank you' to Konoha for allowing the Haruno and Uchiha families to prosper under mutual protection.

Good news—so much of it that the discovery of the curse seal on Deidara's heart, identical to the one found on Orochimaru, amounted to little more than a footnote on the final report.

Itachi and Jiraiya were instructed to continue their investigation with a particular focus on Kandachi and the Genjutsu Tree Village. Half a year of research and leads pointed to Kandachi having a particularly close relationship not only with Zetsu, but with Nagato himself. Something strange was going on in that little village, something that went beyond experiments with unusual trees—something big. One small village should not have had so many patrols, such well-equipped, Akatsuki-backed troops, and such a strangely stagnant population. It gave every impression of a testing ground, and though Jiraiya strongly suspected that the trees and their strange powers were the independent variable, they wouldn't be sure of anything unless they managed to pin Kandachi down and interrogate him. Normally, standard operating procedure prioritized killing targets of S-rank and above since hidden villages didn't want to encourage troops to take undue risks, but after Itachi and Jiraiya's deft handling of Deidara, priorities changed.

When they entered the swamp, passed through the trees' outer area of effect, and got within sight of the village without detecting a single soul, Itachi and Jiraiya shared a meaningful glance and went dark, cloaking their trails with techniques to confuse both chakra-based and conventional tracking.

Someone knew they were coming.

Just to be on the safe side, they reapplied chili oil to their upper lips, though they had to brush off a thin layer of pollen to reach the skin: the stuff was everywhere. But though the chili oil did its work, the anti-tracking techniques refused to stick properly and they nearly doubled the last bit of travel time for all the recasting. In the last hundred-meter stretch, they abandoned the ruse entirely in favor of speed and efficiency; if there was anyone left in that village, they would no doubt be ready and waiting for their unwanted guests' arrival.

Kandachi did not disappoint; just to get through the outer walls, Itachi and Jiraiya had to take out twenty shinobi each. But they were mere distractions buying time for the main event: in the center of the abandoned town square, a massive conch shell sat imposingly on the ground. Its stillness unnerved Itachi; most other animals were polite enough to telegraph their intentions through minute twitches of muscle and sinew—all too easy for a Sharingan to detect and act upon—but calcium carbonate offered no such tells.

"That'll be the Conch King." Jiraiya widened his stance. "Shoots spikes, crazy long tongue, genjutsu that keeps you locked down. Watch the ice-breath; that's how his genjutsu gets you. Lots of fun. Just as nice as his summoner."

A puddle, indistinguishable from the others dotting the rain-soaked ground, distorted and bent like crumpled paper; a wave flowed

upward, became solid, and took on the shape of a man. Kandachi dressed simply, in the grays and blues common for Ame-nin plus a full-face gas mask with a respirator. It was transparent in parts; a dark patch on the exposed areas of his face made him instantly recognizable, as did the cruel twist of his brow. He was a man known for his sadism and arbitrary governance, and it was only the Salamander's strength that had kept Kandachi in check. It was a wonder Nagato wanted to keep him around rather than kill him off the way he'd done with the rest of Hanzo's allies.

"Well, if it isn't Jiraiya the Toad Sage." Kandachi spread his arms wide, a mirror image of a circus ringleader introducing an act. "And the little shadow I've been hearing so much about. Welcome to my home away from home."

"Not here to waste time, Kandachi." Jiraiya's hair stiffened; it was the only surefire way to predict his needle attack, a jutsu Itachi privately referred to as Bad Hair Day. "You've got dirt on the Akatsuki, and we're here to relieve you of it."

Kandachi threw his head back, laughed, and leapt to the top of the massive conch's back. "Right, right, right. Yeah, I heard all about your little protege and his magic eyes." Several pink, barbed appendages snaked out through the opening and waved lazy figure eights through the air. Itachi watched them, wary. "But here's the thing. All that Deidara kid knew how to do was blow shit up. Me? Genjutsu is *my* art. I'm not going to go down that easy."

Jiraiya flipped his long hair sideways, sending out a shower of razor-sharp, white barbs. The Conch King countered it with a volley of pins that emanated from somewhere deep within the shell. "Aye, yai, yai, you gonna do somethin' or you just gonna talk us to death? I got shit to take care of, man."

Kandachi clasped his hands behind his back, now openly grinning down at them. He continued his monologue, and Itachi waited; sooner

or later, he'd have a chance to strike. The trick was finding the *right* moment. Between Itachi and Jiraiya, killing Kandachi was more than doable. Putting him in a position that he could be questioned? Less doable.

"You still don't get it, do you? I've already won. Too bad you don't have the girl with you. She would've already figured it out by now. You two came by at quite a special time. This very month is when these trees bloom, and all that pollen is absolutely loaded with nature chakra. It gets in your lungs, your eyes, even your ears, and from there takes over your whole body. Then it just waits for someone to flip the right switch."

"Ah, shit." Jiraiya reached for the scroll on his back, but froze halfway there when the conch released a thin vapor from its mouth. A double layer of genjutsu. Itachi turned over every detail of the scene with his Sharingan, looking for gaps. He noticed, far too late, the faint glow as the pollen hung in the stagnant air; the mist had been so thick, and the trees' influence on the ambient chakra so total, that he'd missed the subtler details entirely. His body grew sluggish, then heavy, and then impossible to control whatsoever.

Kandachi held up a scroll, unrolling it to its full length of around two meters. A green, oblong seal adorned the length of it. "They say every man's worst enemy is himself. Why waste time coming up with an illusion of my own making when I can borrow your worst nightmare directly from your head? That's why my superiors are such passionate botanists, you see. Once the pollen settles in, I can use its power to create genjutsu based on your own memories. That's all I need to take you down."

Jiraiya clicked his tongue. "Oh, that's not good."

"I think I'll start with your student. Somehow, he pisses me off even more than you do. If I wasn't about to kill his ass, I'd hand him a trophy for kicking you off your throne."

Kandachi raised a hand, snapped his fingers, and Itachi felt the cool, moist breath from the conch settle over him, pinning him down. The world shimmered before his eyes as a hallucinogenic effect began to assault Itachi's grasp on reality. Then Kandachi bit his thumb, and spread the blood across the seal, which began to glow. The air pressure around Itachi fluctuated wildly—or was that the illusion already taking effect?

“Hey, kid!” Jiraiya shouted, but his voice took on the same fluctuating quality as the air, hitting Itachi's ears like gobs of oily sludge. “Don't panic. Just—”

It was fitting that Sakura ended things at their true beginning. This place—the safe house, their kissing house—was special. Sacred. It was here they'd first started becoming friends. And it was here that everything would end.

“I thought I *knew* you.”

She circled him like a shark, darting in to tear off his flesh with a sharp tongue.

“I went digging around for information and found *everything*. Did you know in this world all it took was one little meeting with the right person, and the massacre never happened? Oh, sorry—The Incident.

The night you murdered scores of innocent civilians because somebody told you to: they call it the ‘Uchiha Incident,’ officially. So impersonal. All those people, reduced to euphemistic politics. Because of *you*.”

Itachi could not move. But he didn't want to; she wasn't wrong.

“You really didn't give a shit, did you?”

I was a child.

“A child trained to kill. How old were you when you first took a life?
Six, seven years old? Do you remember their faces?”

I thought I knew what was best.

“Right, right, right. Killing scores of people is *always* best. Man, I
really should've considered that. Everything's okay now!”

*They would have killed more—my family. They would've killed everyone
for more power. It was complicated.*

Sakura laughed at him—a cruel, frigid sound he never wanted to hear
again. “You know, it doesn't even fucking matter that I couldn't find
anything conclusive. There's nothing ‘complicated’ about killing
innocent people. Bet you liked it.”

It hurt. It still hurts.

“Bet you *loved* it, you sick fuck. Bet you'd do it again. And hey, now
you have the opportunity! You should consider yourself lucky—not
many people get *two* chances to commit mass familicide.”

With a flick of her wrist, Sakura summoned a vine. Deep purple thorns the length of Itachi's finger jutted out from the tangled rope of vegetation; she waved an arm, sending the vine flying in his direction only to wrap around his body, puncturing skin and holding him in place. Everywhere the thorns dug in, his skin felt ice cold, and then hot, hot, hot—poison. Itachi wondered if the real Sakura had successfully created her own poisons from scratch yet. She probably had. Unlike him, Sakura chose to rise out of her former circumstances instead of wallowing in them the way he couldn't stop doing.

“Goddamn, you're boring. It's no wonder you have no friends.”

It didn't matter that this Sakura wasn't real—everything else was.

The thorns dug in, and Itachi began to pant as the genjutsu simulated the poison invading his body. His hands and feet began to go numb. Sakura approached him carelessly, with her hands clasped behind her back and a bounce in her step. The tips of her boots—black, golden laces, embroidery tucked into expensive fabric—almost touched his knees when she bid the vine to make him kneel.

Itachi recognized the dagger she pulled from her holster as the one his parents gave her when she first set out on her grand training adventure. It was a fitting end. Rough, indifferent to his pain, Sakura grabbed a fistful of his hair and forced his face up. Her face was smooth and round: the way she'd looked the last time he saw her—it'd been almost another year, now.

“You should've followed Shisui into that river,” she whispered. “Your clan might've been slaughtered anyway, but at least the fish would get fed.”

From somewhere deep inside Itachi's chest came the gasp of something keeping its head above water. It was frail, and fought for

its life alone. But it was there.

“No.”

“No?” Sakura turned her head sideways in an exaggerated, mocking tilt. “You don’t actually think you’re getting out of here alive, do you? You’re just some damaged leftovers. A shell of a once-powerful warrior, if you want to get all fucking poetic. She pities you, you know.”

“No.” Quieter.

“She does. You know she does. That’s why *I* know. It’s all in your disgusting little brain. The trees know what you’ve done, and they told me everything. What a mind you have, what a *life*. This is your private hell, isn’t it? Being forced to reckon with what you’ve done. You couldn’t have gone with something simpler, like spiders?”

Yes, Itachi thought. This was his private hell.

That was how he knew where all the exits were.

The wheels of his Sharingan spun. Sakura, so assured of her power over him, scoffed and turned her back. Itachi drew upon his chakra, concentrated it in his chest, and held it there. Bits and pieces of the illusion started flaking away—first at the edges and then creeping inward, casting an eerie look upon the landscape as though it were a painting half finished. Releasing the chakra, Itachi seeded it into the illusory vines, feeling for the familiar warmth of Sakura’s chakra and finding nothing. He focused on the discrepancy; its wrongness centered his mind, despite the rest of his senses insisting that what he saw and felt were real.

Memories returned to him, each of them digging talons into the genjutsu and tearing it to bits.

she surprised him

*squished together at the center of the booth, surrounded on all sides by
raucous revelers*

The deep green of her eyes

She took Itachi by the hands, and didn't let him go

raw sugar, vanilla, cardamom, cloves, allspice, and coriander

*the way she brimmed with life in her too-brief moments of unguarded
happiness*

seeking solace in one another's company

"Why did you do it?"

"Bastard."

"Oh, my god, we are fucked, aren't we?"

No.

“There’s something about each of us that gives the world a happier future.”

“Private meetings at the kissing house. What will your mother say?”

“I’ve never seen you smile before. I like it.”

There.

The illusion shattered.

Sakura spun around. “Stop!” But the thread had already been pulled, the glass broken, the dream undone, and the Sharingan, too quick not to notice, pulled and pulled until the scene fell to pieces.

There was a seam in the genjutsu, directly underneath where the caster stood; under the false Sakura’s feet lay the doorway. He stood, silent, and the vines fell from his body like paper streamers. By the time Sakura noticed, Itachi was already on top of her, holding a kunai to her throat. The action was more symbolic than anything else—killing the caster within the genjutsu would, at best, give them a headache in the real world—but of far more import than the practicality was the feeling of victory and the sharp pain of a wound, long festering, finally starting to heal.

Sakura struggled, to no avail. When she spoke, it was Kandachi’s voice that left her mouth, not Sakura’s. “You’re still a murderer; nothing will ever take that away.”

“My limitations do not define me. Neither does my doubt.”

Fissures appeared all over Sakura’s skin, and Itachi’s, too; they glowed, and stretched, and grew. As she crumbled to pieces, Sakura gave him one last, sadistic grin.

“She only tolerates you, you know. Because you’re more useful to her alive than dead. She’ll never love you.”

“If you think I haven’t already accepted that fact, you aren’t as good at this as you think you are. But I’d expect nothing less than disappointment from the Salamander’s table scraps.” Itachi made a single hand sign, and let loose the rest of his chakra like a bolt of lightning.

Release.

Itachi snapped back to reality. Jiraiya, already freed from whatever dreams he’d been subject to, had Kandachi in a chokehold. Kandachi himself was spent, and his Conch King vanished with a puff of steam; with no energy left to fight, he’d nearly gone limp, eyes vacant, kept upright mainly by Jiraiya’s arms. Itachi frowned; the genjutsu shouldn’t have taken that much of a toll—

“Fuck both of you,” Kandachi said. “And fuck *him*. I’m done.”

“You’re not getting off that easy.” Jiraiya gave him a shake. “We still have some questions for you.”

“You’re both so in over your fucking heads it isn’t funny.”

“What the hell are you—”

Kandachi began to seize. Bloodied froth bubbled at the corners of his mouth, and with a wet gasp, Kandachi died. Jiraiya swore. He dropped Kandachi’s corpse, split open the chest with a cutting wind technique, and swore again. Remnants of the curse seal on Kandachi’s heart still glowed red-hot, even as the body began falling apart. The seal taunted them, hissing as it finished eating up the heart and damaging the lungs before it grew quiet and the glow of the foreign chakra faded. They sealed the body in a scroll, and left the empty village in poor spirits.

Another inn, another bed, another pillow, another present, another note. Same handwriting.

You’ve come a long way from the boy I once trained. Or perhaps you never were that boy from the start. Perhaps you’re someone else’s boy—a boy who came from somewhere far away. Happy belated birthday. These dango are only served this time of year in the Land of Water. I hope you enjoy them.

Signed—your Strange Benefactor ;)

Itachi did not eat the dango. Jiraiya wouldn’t have let him even if he wanted to. They watched the package burn down to ash. It was, by all appearance’s sake, a normal box containing ordinary dango. Jiraiya pocketed the note with a scowl.

Itachi (17) & Sakura (16)

Year 2, Month 10

Land of Whirlpools

Midsummer in the islands was a gentle season, the intense heat lessened by the winds that blew in from the cooler south. Sakura took Itachi by the hand, leading him through the great hulking masses of bombed-out, long-abandoned buildings given over to nature. At the intersection of two boulevards, she stopped to take in the sunset, one hand held protectively above her eyes. Then, right before the tension became too much to bear, she held out a sheet of paper, folded: the letter from Fugaku to Minato. She told Itachi where and how she found it, and then chewed her bottom lip to shreds as she waited for him to read it.

“I don’t know if it’s real,” Sakura said once Itachi finished reading it. He opened his hand; the letter fell to the ground, into a puddle. “But I wanted you to see it.”

“Thank you.”

“I don’t know why I went looking for it in the first place. It’s not like anything I found here would really mean anything to us.”

“You wanted to confirm, to the best of your abilities, the motivations of a known killer and international criminal. While your search ended without absolutes, the decision to investigate was strategically sound. There are more similarities than differences between this world and our own. I would have done the same. Had you not suspected me at all, I would have called you a fool. My frustration with you was

personal; I never questioned your instincts on the matter.”

“But we wasted so much time....” Sakura bowed her head.

“Time we’ll never get back. Do you want to know?”

“Tell me.”

Itachi sat down on a piece of rubble. Sakura joined him, picking her way carefully through exposed rebar and stagnant pools of water.

“As far as I’m aware, the Uchiha Clan in this world followed much the same path as their counterpart in our world. In Konoha, at least: Madara betrayed the village and ran, and the Uchiha were ostracized for it. Things improved under the Fourth—so my father said—but by the time the nine-tailed fox attacked the village, plans were already well underway for a coup. The Fourth’s death, and subsequent attempts to blame the Uchiha for the attack, only sealed everyone’s fate. My father ordered me to accept a role within ANBU to spy on the clan. And I, acting on my own, revealed what I knew of our plans to the Hokage. I was ordered to kill my clan shortly after several rounds of diplomatic talks fell through. To assist in my mission, I sought the help of a man I thought was Madara. It turned out to be Obito.”

“My god.” Sakura stared down at her knees, and tried to imagine herself somewhere else—somewhere she had the time and the energy to receive Itachi’s confession with an ounce of the gravity it deserved.

“I am not certain of the extent of Danzo’s involvement. Before he committed suicide, Shisui told me that Danzo stole his eye. Shisui had intended to use his Mangekyo’s power of influence—the Kotoamatsukami—to turn Fugaku towards peace before it was too late. But Danzo took the eye for himself before he got that chance. I’m

certain he justified his actions as being in favor of the village. Danzo was a ruthless man, with a willingness to be cruel to accomplish his goals. But he was loyal to Konoha to the very end.”

“I still don’t understand.” Sakura turned over a piece of concrete rubble in her hands. “They ordered a single person to kill the entire clan? A child?”

“I don’t believe they expected me to succeed. Most likely, my actions were intended to provoke a conflict within the clan itself, since not every clan member supported the coup. Mass murder would have provided Konoha with both a convenient distraction and justification to mobilize the entire military against us. Without Obito’s help, I would not have survived.”

“So...what changed? What’s different?”

“Who can say? I was born late in this world, and Obito lived as my parents’ son. Your grandmother is alive, and the civil war in the Land of Honey never happened. The butterfly effect could be a very literal possibility.”

“The letter said that the masked man *helped* seal the fox back into Kushina. Do you think it was Obito? I guess Zetsu and Madara could’ve given that mask to any Sharingan user they managed to capture. Or the whole letter could be a lie. Or it could be someone who isn’t an Uchiha at all but got the Sharingan anyway. Nagato...?”

Itachi shrugged. “Nagato is a possibility. It could be anyone, for that matter, if they were forced to cooperate by virtue of the seal.”

“Whoever it was, it said they had a compulsive curse seal on them. Does that mean whoever put the seal on Kandachi and Orochimaru is

the same person who's been watching us?"

"I don't think it's a coincidence, but we shouldn't assume anything until we know more."

"You're right."

They sat on the concrete until night fell, and their bodies grew cold as the oceanic winds swept through the air, untamed by the heat.

"I have only my own word to recommend me," Itachi told her as they journeyed back to camp. "But if you require it, I will do everything I can to prove my sincerity to your satisfaction."

Sakura hugged him. It was as easy as breathing now: feeling the warmth of his living body, the way his form sat solid against her softer, rounder flesh.

"It's time to move on. We can't forget what happened, but we can move on. You don't need to prove anything to me."

He was nearly a head taller than her, now; when she looked up into his eyes, the back of her neck pinched from the strain.

"Not anymore."

Chapter End Notes

Dear Diary, today I was emotionally slutty in my letter to Sakura Haruno. I am going to learn an earth technique that will allow me to dig a hole to the center of the earth. I will then bury myself

alive, using a second earth technique that will allow me to fill the hole that was dug to the center of the earth. Love, Itachi Uchiha.

One of my favorite things about canon Itachi is that he is a passive aggressive bitch. If there is an opportunity to throw shade, he is throwing it. If there is no opportunity, he will make one. Stan

1. Can you believe the Conch King is canon, like how much more of a filler character can you be just like the design and the fighting moves and everything jfc dude even the hair
2. should Deidara be canceled for making problematic art
3. are you planting milkweed for the monarch butterflies if you live in a monarch zone
4. can you feel the love between Itachi and Jiraiya
5. would you let Sauce Keigh zap you if you went code blue
6. oh yeah and sakura found out about the uchiha thing i guess

typing one handed with cat on lap

Of how our two real lives might intersect

Chapter Summary

In this chapter Sakura realizes Itachi has an ass and Itachi has his italicized OH moment

Chapter Notes

I went over my works and categorized things into fandom-based series. My Naruto Fics is, as you would imagine, where my Naruto stuff now lives. Some are doubled marked because they're in other series as well (like the GaaSaku trilogy) but My Naruto Fics is meant to be broad for the sake of subscribing. In other words, if you want to just get alerts regarding my Naruto Content, then subscribe to My Naruto Fics. If you want to get alerts just for Top Gun, subscribe to Assorted Top Gun Tales for HIGH QUALITY PREMIUM GAY PILOT SEX and/or Things the Navy Doesn't Want You to Know for HIGH QUALITY PREMIUM FUNNY GAY PILOT SEX. If you want to subscribe to both, you are Horizon_moon_eclipse.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sakura Haruno (16)

Year 3, Month 4

Acer saccharinum

“Ready?”

“Are you ready?”

“Remember not to push too much, and don't worry if the Byakugou

fades again after we're done sparring. We still don't know how it'll behave. You can tap out any time you want. Sound reasonable?"

"Sounds like advice from a guy who thinks his ass might get kicked."

The problem hadn't been finding the nature energy; the problem was latching on and wrestling it into the Byakugou. Nature energy was everywhere—it was life itself—and, being life itself, it resisted fences.

But Sakura persisted, and two years of blood, sweat, and tears led her to this point: on a day exactly like any other, in the middle of a meditation that had nothing to do with the seal, something within Sakura went *click*, and there it was. This seal was hexagonal, nearly circular from a distance, unlike the rhombus worn by her predecessor. Kushina had supposed a Byakugou filled with pure nature chakra might look different, feel different, and she was right.

Sakura widened her stance, and shot Tenzo a toothy grin. The slightest *touch* of her chakra on the seal's boundaries filled her with manic energy and a feeling like she could do anything, anywhere, to anyone. Nature energy erupted from the seal like a volcano, filling her chakra pathways with searing power. She raised one hand, and a cloud of pollen filled the air like a hurricane, alighting upon everything around her; she could *feel* the shape of the land beneath the pollen, and knew that nothing above ground could hide from her.

Sakura raised her other hand, and massive roots shot up out of the soil with a groan, reaching for the heavens at breakneck speed. By the time she blinked, they were waist height, and by the time she blinked again, she had to squint to see the tops. The roots touched one another, and beneath the soil they magnified the fungal network, connecting Sakura with the millions of life forms under her feet. Everything—all of this life—had always been there; but now, *now* she could see it.

Forgetting Tenzo entirely, Sakura beckoned one of the towering branches and jumped on top of it when it bowed to meet her. She ran across the network of the forest she had made, vines sprouting from her body as fast as she could imagine, creating bridges and handholds. Trembling from the effort of maintaining control, Sakura tried to slow the release of chakra from the Byakugou, and found that she simply couldn't. Trying was like pressing her hand against a faucet to stop the water: for a few seconds there was the illusion of control, but it didn't last.

So she stopped trying, and rode the waves of energy like a bird on the wind. It was amazing. It was euphoric. Sakura tasted salt, her tears dripping down her cheeks as the sensation of pure life overwhelmed her. There were so many living things, and all of them were important. But where once she had been one among the masses, now she ruled over them—a being both like and unlike to its peers—the tree that had started the forest, and whose branches were highest, whose roots were deepest.

“Sakura, stop!” A voice from below, muffled by leaves, called out to her.

“I can't!”

Her skin itched. She looked down to see papery sheets of birch bark peeling up from her body, that quickly grew leaves and elongated seed pods. There was no cold dread, no panic—she simply thought, *Yes*.

A tree's mind was simple; it concerned itself with living, and not being eaten (at first) and not letting other trees steal its food (later). Sakura felt her consciousness slipping away bit by bit, and found that what was left of her didn't care at all. Was this what it felt like, to become one with nature itself? Those Senju who reached for the sun—Sakura had felt so sorry for them before, but now Sakura wondered why it had taken her so long to know what they must have known: that the ultimate shinobi art was not to control nature, but become it.

There were no more eyes to close. There was no more mouth to whisper goodbye. No hands to hold, no hair to wave in the wind, no body or flesh of any kind. Sakura slipped away into the darkness, and met it with what used to be a smile.

And a voice in the darkness, one that Sakura did not recognize, said,

Not like this, my dear. This is all wrong. So very bad. Try again. I can't save you from her every time, you know.

Sakura's eyes flew open. Everything hurt: her muscles ached, her chakra pathways collapsed, and it was all she could do not to scream. She was lying on the ground with Tenzo half-crouched over her, and the forest she had made all around her. The smell of decay permeated the air, all damp and heavy; as she watched, the forest began to die. It started with a few leaves, and then one by one the trees fell, their trunks rotting from the inside out. A few ANBU stood at the edges of the small clearing where Sakura had landed

"Oh, thank god." Tenzo's hands shook. Shallow breaths broke his phrases down into words and gasps, as though any minute he might burst into tears. "You started to turn into—are you okay? Are you in pain? Tiger, Bat—get over here, *now*."

Two of the ANBU crowded her: the medic among them, and the one with the second best ass. Tiger placed glowing hands on Sakura's chest, and again Sakura struggled not to cry out. Mystical palm techniques did cause a patient discomfort on occasion, depending on the problem at hand; but never did it burn like fire—this one did.

"Her chakra pathways are seizing."

“What does that mean?” Tenzo put a hand on her forehead, and Sakura focused on the feel of his skin, attempting to force every other sensation to the edge of her perception.

“Too much nature energy at once—her whole system is burned out.”

“Is it permanent?”

“It shouldn’t be.” Tiger moved one hand to Sakura’s stomach; Sakura felt a tickle when the medical chakra prodded the tenketsu there. “Her chakra is already trying to heal the damage on its own; but it’ll take time. She’s lucky to still be here.”

Bat tilted their head. “Her seal is gone. But at least we know it works, I guess. Maybe next time she shouldn’t use it all at once like that.”

Tenzo informed Bat exactly where they could put their stupid, unnecessary, asinine opinions, employing in the process curses so vile that Sakura was left in awe.

“Sorry,” she croaked. The darkness beckoned again, but this was a more familiar darkness: complete and utter exhaustion.

“Go to sleep,” Tenzo said. “You’re going to be fine.”

We’re gonna need at least ten journal pages for this one, sensei, Sakura thought, impish to the very end. Tiger placed a hand over her eyes, blocking out the light. And then Sakura knew no more.

February 14

From: Sakura Haruno, Land of Mountain Streams

To: Itachi Uchiha, Land of Water

Thanks for the well-wishes. I've been able to use chakra for a couple weeks now, but only today it stopped hurting. The Byakugou is still gone; I can feel the seal's presence and that it's empty, and I stored some of my own chakra in it just to see if it took (it did). But I think that's my last adventure in storing pure nature chakra. In retrospect, it was really fucking stupid to do what I did. But as I am not dead, I can say without irony that at least I tried. I think I'm going to keep storing my own chakra and see where that goes. I've already started to notice that my healing techniques are way more effective than they were before I had the mokuton. It was really subtle at first, but the more I develop my skills, the more obvious it is. Sometimes, I barely have to direct my chakra: it seems to know faster than I do what's wrong.

So I've been learning some cool things about invasive plants. Before, I would've thought that all invasive plants are bad for the environment on principle. Turns out it's a lot more complicated than that. Many invasive plants do ravage the ecosystems they're introduced to. But every once in a while, you'll get an invasive plant that fits in.

As you know by now, vines are kind of my thing, so I started my study on invasives with the dodder. It's a type of vine that develops parasitic symbiosis with a host. The dodder doesn't make chlorophyll, so it has to steal food from other plants. Because it makes the host plant vulnerable to other parasites and diseases, botanists consider the dodder itself a disease. It's been causing a lot of problems in the Land of Lightning; normally, the dodder weakens but doesn't kill its host (it wouldn't be a good idea to kill its food source, after all), but in Lightning, it's been wiping out some species of trees that just weren't strong enough to make up for the nutrient loss.

But here in the Land of Mountain Streams, there's a parasitic plant called

the love vine that has a much more unique relationship with its host. Tenzo and I were sent here to do some land management with the goal of stopping the spread. While cleaning up the vines, though, I noticed the weirdest thing: some trees seemed to be doing relatively well living with the vine, while other trees right next to them were visibly dying.

After further investigation, I found out that the healthier trees had all been infested with parasitic wasp larvae. These wasps lay eggs under the bark, and then the larvae release chemicals that make the tree form these bubbles of nutrients around the larvae (called galls); that's what the larvae eats. But on these infested trees, the love vine had pierced every one of those galls, taken the nutrients for itself, and subsequently killed the larvae inside. We treated these trees like all the rest—because in the end, both the vine and the larvae were bad for it—but I hadn't really considered how complicated a parasite can be. Here's my sketches of it:



Sorry for rambling. Anyway, I think that once our training is over, we should brawl. Even if I can't drop a fully-grown sequoia on your head with a flick of my magic wand, I can still punt your bitch ass into the sun and fix you up after. Peace and blessings be upon ye.

Itachi Uchiha (17)

Year 3, Month 6

Infiltration

Jiraiya did not remain constantly at Itachi's side. Personal business called for his attention abroad, and the minute Jiraiya deemed Itachi skilled enough to avoid their shared enemies alone, he began to take brief solo trips. Itachi never knew Jiraiya's reasons for leaving; small errands were always announced, and recounted in great detail upon Jiraiya's return. But when Jiraiya turned to Itachi and said, "I might be gone for a bit," that was all Itachi knew. Even the return date remained mysterious. Itachi was a worrier, and so he worried, but there was little he could do but trust the man. Attempting to tail Jiraiya would result in an obnoxious lecture at best.

Jiraiya's most recent trip involved an interesting caveat, however. On an ordinary day, on a lonely road, Jiraiya stopped in his tracks and turned to Itachi with an interesting question. They'd been traveling together for two and a half years, now, Jiraiya said. Itachi had had ample time to study the Akatsuki, to investigate their members, and to track down (albeit unsuccessfully) the true nature of the one called Zetsu. So far, all of their missions had been Jiraiya's design.

But now, he wanted to give Itachi an opportunity to direct their path forward. Where, Jiraiya wanted to know, should they travel to next—and what should they look for when they arrived? To Itachi's startled stare, Jiraiya remarked teasingly that if Itachi needed some time to think, then he had it: twenty-four hours of thinking time, in fact.

It was a monumental gift. For two and a half years, Itachi had been a follower. Never had his mind strayed from his and Sakura's purpose in

this world, and never had he stopped mapping out as many scenarios as he could think of that ended in Kaguya's demise—and her servants', as well. And now Jiraiya had given him a golden opportunity to move towards that end. The only question was one of practicality. He couldn't very well ask Jiraiya to help him locate Obito, or ask him if Nagato had already had the Rinnegan when Jiraiya trained him as a child. But he didn't want to squander the opportunity, either; more than most other people, Jiraiya knew the importance of keeping secrets. If they did stumble onto something big, Jiraiya—and the Fourth, for that matter—wouldn't dive in swords blazing and send this timeline into an uncontrollable freefall. Where could they go that would provide Itachi with useful information on Akatsuki's movements without bringing unnecessary scrutiny into his motivations?

"Kirigakure," he told Jiraiya as they prepared for bed. "There have been rumors surrounding the Mizukage's erratic behavior."

"Ol' Bloody Mist Yagura? What about him?"

By this time in the other world, he'd long since fallen prey to Obito's genjutsu—a multifaceted ploy intended to measure the limits of Obito's illusory power and provide the Akatsuki with a puppet government on a continental scale. No doubt the Fourth already had eyes on their sly southern neighbors, but though they'd traveled nearly everywhere else, Kirigakure itself had so far remained off of their itinerary.

"Due to their economic troubles, Ame has become desperate, and their previous good relationship with Iwa has soured as a result of Honey's interference with mission pricing. After what we witnessed in the swamp, I think we should start paying closer attention to subtler signs of manipulation. We wouldn't be the first to suspect he's being controlled by a genjutsu, but we may be the first to look closer, if we're careful."

Itachi watched as Jiraiya digested his words, trying not to sweat. There *had* been rumors—Jiraiya had been there last week when a bartender mentioned off the cuff that Kiri nin had been looking leaner than usual on their stopovers in the little border town—but Jiraiya could stick his hand in a haystack with his eyes closed and come out with a needle.

“Mmm. Hmm. *Hmm*. Mm. Yeah.” Jiraiya nodded. “Makes sense. You think Nagato’s worried?”

“Definitely. He’s nothing if not paranoid.”

“Hey.”

“Yes?”

“Gonna take me a little trip first. I’ll be back in two days. In the meantime, you—” Jiraiya pulled a blank scroll and a slim bingo book out of his pocket and handed them over. “—sketch me out a containment seal for Yagura based on what you know about him.”

“I’m not sure my skills in the art are to a level that would contain a kage.”

“Didn’t say we were gonna use it. I want to see what you can do based on prior knowledge. Just give me a rough outline. In a fight, you aren’t going to have time to write a whole damn essay about your opponent. But if you have a template, you can leave it partially blank and fill in the rest as you learn more.”

“Could we use a generic seal instead? What is the purpose in

personalizing a seal to that extent in this specific situation?”

“Couldn’t you use a rock to fight a guy instead of a sword?”

Itachi’s left eyebrow twitched. Jiraiya flashed him a shit-eating grin and a sloppy salute.

“Two days, Uchiha. Don’t let me down.”

Two days later, Itachi watched Jiraiya turn the scroll over and over in his hands. Nothing went unremarked upon, not even the backside, which Jiraiya checked for bleed-through. There wasn’t any this time—Itachi had learned *that* lesson all too well after nearly getting suffocated by his own work when the ink for the characters ‘air’ and ‘nothing’ bled together underneath the surface.

“Mmkay,” Jiraiya muttered. “Whadda we got here—human, male, turtle, web, sticky, ensnare, mockery, insecure, short—heh, nice—arrogance, dismay, shadow, break-seal, genjutsu-destroy—good, good—what’s this?”

Jiraiya pointed to the second-to-last ring. There, Itachi had written *Sharingan-Mangekyo-Illusion-Hidden-Moon-One-Eye-Mask-Uchiha-Deceit-Break* three times over, each character equidistant from its neighbors. Obito’s dojutsu was powerful, and if there was ever a time to get wordy as a precaution, this was it. The seal wouldn’t be used, obviously, as it was just a training exercise, but Itachi planned on keeping his homework this time. Just in case.

Itachi did not look at Jiraiya when he answered. “A shinobi of that

caliber isn't likely to be caught in a low-level genjutsu." He kept his breaths even, his face devoid of troubled squints and furrowed brows. "A high-level Sharingan is capable of providing both total and long-term control, even from a distance."

"If that's true, who might own that Sharingan? Or who might have stolen one?"

Obito *had* possessed a small collection of Sharingan for his personal use. But the distinction hardly mattered for the sake of practice work.

"I couldn't say."

"Hmm. You know, I think you may be onto something. This is pretty nice." Jiraiya whipped out a quill, loaded it up with some of his personal sealing ink, and made a few annotations to Itachi's work. "Just gonna polish this up a bit. Real nice job with this one. Personal. Cautious in the theoretical, but aggressive in the execution. Love it."

"Thank you, sensei."

"Let's go try it out."

"What."

Yagura chased them all the way to the border in two-tails form, flowered club in hand with a wall of wind and ice behind him. But he chased them under his own power, and his mind was his own once

more. Jiraiya and Itachi limped all the way to the nearest resort for what Jiraiya declared was a well-earned break. It was off-season, and a skeleton crew maintained the property, but it was the thought that counted.

“Well, I’ll be ding-dong-damned, kid,” Jiraiya raised his glass; tonight, he drank his sex on the beach with *top* shelf liquor. “You got one hell of an intuition.”

“Less intuition and more relevant prior knowledge.”

Too cheeky. Too close to the truth. But Jiraiya only shrugged, leaning back in his wicker chair until the straw hat nearly toppled from his head.

“Whatever it is, I ain’t complainin.’ Where next, chief?”

Where to? The closest red herring. “Where was the last confirmed sighting of the zombie twins?”

“Land of Stone, as I recall. That’s a long trip—oh, what’s this? For me?”

“No, Lord Jiraiya. For the young man.” The bartender, a nondescript person with a face destined to get lost in any crowd, placed a tall, colorful drink on a coaster in front of Itachi. Beneath the drink lay a folded note.

Don’t get too much better at that, or I’ll really start to get worried.

A flicker of movement to Itachi's left caught his eye. He scrambled out of the chair and drew his sword, mirrored by a startled Jiraiya, but the bar had mysteriously emptied itself of patrons. Not just the patrons—the bartender, too, was gone. Vanished, as though he'd never been there in the first place—there was no smell, no cleaning rag tossed aside, no fingerprints on the glass cups. Nothing at all. Just the memory of a man whose features Itachi could no longer recall.

Sakura Haruno (17)

Year 3, Month 10

Toxicodendron diversilobum

The trick to success for parasitic plants lay in the slow initiation. A plant that took over its host suddenly risked death by association: drained rapidly of its nutrients, the host plant was likely to die from shock, which in turn would kill the parasite. A good parasite grew with caution, considering the abilities of its host and the likelihood of detection by protective forces, be they other symbiotic organisms or the plant's own immune system. A good parasite waited.

White Zetsu attacked Sakura in the middle of the night, taking everyone by surprise. Entering the minor lord's guest wing where Sakura slept, Zetsu ambushed her entourage with four clones in tow. Sakura was not alone—the ANBU charged to guard her did not hesitate to leap to her aid—but White Zetsu was clever, and each clone the ANBU decapitated, de-limbed, or otherwise maimed regrew itself. By the time the battle reached its peak, Sakura had been walled in by her guards, left in the center like a calf surrounded by wild buffalo.

Sakura was not helpless, though. She did not leave the protective circle, but knelt in place, finding her center with a deep breath, sending pulses of chakra through the floor that reached the earth below the wooden slats; there were new saplings beneath her feet, destined to die for the lack of sunlight the house inflicted upon them; now, they sprang up to Sakura's aid, breaking the wooden floor with laughable ease and seeking out White Zetsu and his mindless servants.

"Oh, I see." White Zetsu did not dodge the shuriken thrown his way. "It has learned so well. A shame it could not tap the Mother's strength. It nearly became a sister—growing leaves, branches, bark. We saw it try, and we saw it fall. A shame, a shame; it might have been useful, had it succeeded."

White Zetsu did not move like a living, breathing creature—no proper muscles to tense in warning, no proper eyes to follow their target—and so when his body exploded into a cancerous mass of white trees, vines, and roots, three ANBU did not quite dodge in time and were impaled by the gnarled growths. Sakura swore viciously and bid her allied branches to counter, but though she stopped any further damage from occurring, it was too late for those who had been in White Zetsu's path.

"Its powers are a gift." White Zetsu's features melted into the pale, plantlike growth, but his voice remained, filling the room with his strange, sing-song cadence. "We saw the moment she gave it the power of life itself. Why does it resist us? We are family now. We *know* it now, in ways no other being can match. We are all connected."

Two more ANBU fell. Tenzo grabbed Sakura by the hand. "Now," he shouted. Sakura reached for the chakra stored in her Byakugou; it wasn't much—the seal hadn't even reformed itself—but it was enough to power a sharp axe kick that shattered the dry, dead boards beneath her feet and exposed the earth. Together, Tenzo and Sakura pooled their mokuton energy, seeded it below, and called for aid with everything they had.

The earth listened. The plants listened. And Sakura's borrowed room became a forest. While not rivaling the majesty of the foliage Sakura had seen the First produce in that Other world, it was enough to destabilize White Zetsu and open him up to further attack. Two ANBU, both Uchiha, lit up White Zetsu and his tangled growth with a ball of white-hot flame, peeling paint from the walls and filling the air with the scent of burning flesh.

When they caught their breath, White Zetsu was gone—not dead, but gone. The room lay in ruins. Five ANBU lay dead on the floor. Tenzo and Sakura dropped to their knees, spent.

“I think,” Tenzo panted, “it's time—for another visit—with Lord Jiraiya.”

Itachi (18) & Sakura (17)

Year 3, Month 11

Land of Hot Water

The experiments, which until then Tenzo and Minato had resolutely spared Sakura from experiencing, commenced the moment Sakura entered the rented house in Bamboo Village. A dozen medic-nin, three researchers, and Shikaku descended upon her with frightening intensity; as the medic-nin pasted Sakura with diagnostic seals and the researchers scribbled frantic notes and muttered amongst themselves, Shikaku asked Sakura a barrage of questions that she answered as thoroughly as she could. What exactly had it felt like when her mokuton awakened? Had she felt anything before the day she leapt into the darkness beneath the safehouse—anything that might have been the mokuton in hibernation? Had White Zetsu touched her that day, and might that have triggered the mokuton's emergence? Could

she sense White Zetsu's presence? Did she think he might sense hers?

By question ten, Sakura had a headache. By question fifty, she wanted to lay on the ground and cry. *I didn't ask for this*, she wanted to scream. *I didn't ask for any of this*. But it wouldn't help anybody, least of all herself, and so she drew upon Tenzo's many calming exercises and did her best to endure. Tenzo wrung his hands in the corner, kept company by Jiraiya, who oversaw the entire process and worked with Shikaku to direct the team.

Six hours later, there still remained more questions than answers regarding Sakura's abilities, but the authenticity of her mokuton—a natural ability, and not grafted like Tenzo's—was confirmed to Jiraiya and Shikaku's satisfaction. It was not, as everyone had feared, an implant from White Zetsu that he could use to monitor or control her. The vines that had erupted in her defense in the safehouse had most likely been what the newly triggered mokuton had sensed would best protect her, given the situation.

The Konoha team left. Jiraiya and Tenzo discussed immediate next steps, and determined that drinking their stress away was not only helpful, but mandatory. They made their way to a fancy cocktail bar on the same block as the Daimyo's summer residence; Itachi and Sakura followed several paces behind. Normally, Sakura took point on their in-person outings; today, she clung to Itachi's arm and trembled, emotionally rattled enough to give him complete discretion as to their pace and direction.

"I'm not possessed...or whatever...by Plant Boy or the giant, creepy tree that he popped out of," Sakura slurred after cocktail four—some outlandishly fiddly thing that came with a skewer of fried food as a garnish. "So...that's good. I guess. Man, fuck me. Fuck the weirdo that's been following us. Fuck all of this dumbass shit. People *died* because of me. It's not—it's not the same as back then, you know... people dying because I wasn't strong enough. Now it's..." Sakura sniffed, and swiped at her nose with the tissue beneath her drink. "Because I'm *too* strong. Attracting attention and shit. God, they all probably had families, and...fuck, man."

Itachi stirred his second cocktail—a perfectly reasonable drink that stopped after three ingredients and included a brandied cherry—and considered what he could possibly say to assuage Sakura’s fears. *Don’t worry*, he wanted to say. *All of this is happening for a reason*. Still, he knew that if their positions had been reversed, it would’ve taken an act of god not to roll his eyes at the inanity of such platitudes.

“Hey.” Sakura poked Itachi in the ear. “Are you glad to be going home, at least? Three years went by pretty fast.”

The abrupt change in subject was one Itachi had been expecting. “Ah,” he said, letting the previous topic fly away with the breeze. “Unfortunately, my turn will have to wait.”

“What do you mean?”

“On our way here, the Fourth sent a message letting Jiraiya know that his primary mission has changed. We had been tailing the Akatsuki generally, but after what happened here, he wants us to focus our efforts on Zetsu specifically.”

Sakura blinked. “Us?”

“Jiraiya, and myself. My training mission has ended. When he and I depart the Land of Hot Water, our mission to determine Zetsu’s exact nature, and his connection to you and your mokuton, will begin. It may be several more months before I’m able to return home.”

Sakura hung her head. “Oh. I was kind of looking forward to...”

“I know.”

“At least we know the Akatsuki isn’t making too much trouble. As far as I’ve heard, they haven’t even done one extraction.”

“I haven’t heard anything to that end, no.”

Sakura raised her hand to summon the server, fully committed to blacking out before seven in the evening. Itachi lowered her hand, fully committed to keeping his clothing free of gin-scented vomit. Twice with Jiraiya was enough. Sakura glared him down, but Itachi didn’t let her arm go until the bartender’s attention wandered elsewhere. She stared at her skin where he touched her, wondering drunkenly about the feel of his skin on hers—the smooth warmth of his palms, and the rough calluses everywhere else from years of handling swords.

And then she wondered—suddenly, strongly, and out of absolutely nowhere—what *else* those hands were capable of handling. A warmth bubbled up in her body, but this feeling was nothing like the mokuton—it felt like a wild creature, one that had slumbered for ages but had now startled wide awake, hungry and restless. It sat at the pit of her stomach, and did not go away.

“Um,” Sakura said. “Uh. I just...did you...?”

“Did I...what?”

Sakura looked at Itachi’s hands. She looked at his face, and into his eyes. She didn’t *think* she was in a genjutsu. A quick check of her chakra pathways revealed no sluggishness, or unusual spikes or dips of energy. That feeling...was it nausea? It had to be nausea. Sakura prayed that it was nausea. Food poisoning was a common occurrence.

No, no—she'd had too much to drink. That was it. It had been good of Itachi to stop her before she committed to a fifth adult beverage. If she'd downed another, who knew where else these thoughts might have wandered? What a thoughtful person Itachi could be. So—so thoughtful, and such nice hands, and what a lovely face he had: fine-boned and delicate, where the rest of his body was so solid.

“Sakura?”

Though...Sakura could hardly make judgements on how the rest of his body measured up to his face...without *seeing* the body. Sakura looked at Itachi's shoulders. They looked so very wide and strong. Dear god. Dear fucking god fucking god dammit this was *not* happening to her, this was stupid teenage hormones acting up and nothing else. She couldn't think of Itachi this way, it was *wrong*. He was—he was *him*, and she was Sakura Haruno; she was not allowed to look at him in this way. She had no right to, when he'd put such faith in her, and made himself so vulnerable over and over again, and she would *not* betray that faith by doing all the things she suddenly imagined herself doing to him—running her hands across his chest, and pulling his hair as he—

Itachi rested the back of his hand against her forehead. “You look ill.”

“I...I think I am. So very ill. Yes.”

She needed a distraction. She needed a distraction *yesterday*. An abrupt change in subject—something she and Itachi could discuss—work-related, maybe, something he'd seen or done on his mission, *anything* to distract herself from—

“So, um. Has Jiraiya ever taken you to any dirty places?”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Death was coming. *Death was coming.*

Itachi gave Sakura the most powerful side-eye the world had ever seen. “Dirty places? Every space the Toad Sage occupies becomes a dirty place by default.”

Sakura giggled like a maniac. She wanted to die. She wanted to cry. She wanted to grab Itachi by the cheeks and—fuck. *Fuck.* Well, yes, maybe fuck him, too, but— *no.*

“I mean like...” She needed to change the subject. Itachi had just given her an out, and if she didn’t take it and run, then how fucking stupid— “Like you know, a brothel or something. I mean, you’re old enough. Has he taken you to one?”

Fuck. No. Stop. Why. Shit, fuck.

The eyebrow went up. “I’ve been old enough for two years, legally speaking. Three years in the Land of Wind and its vassal nations.”

“Right. Right, right, right. It’s, um—it’s okay,” Sakura blurted out. “If you did go to one. Just for fun, and relaxing, I guess. Whatever people go for. I mean, we’re not together for real, it’s just, you know, the betrothal and everything, but that isn’t—it wouldn’t be cheating. It would be fine.”

And it would be even *more* fine if she could watch.

No. This was *not happening*. Sakura grabbed Itachi’s drink, attempted to take a single sip, and choked on it. The liquor burned her trachea like fire: a fitting death for a pitiful wretch such as she. Had her mind

ever been this dirty in the other world? Surely not. She'd wanted to hop on Sasuke's dick, yes, but that was *Other* Sasuke and he was different, and this was Sasuke's *brother*. She couldn't bone *Sasuke's brother*.

Somebody had to stop her. If somebody didn't stop her, she was about to do something *unbelievably* slutty. Worse—she might not even regret it later.

“Well,” Itachi said, retrieving his drink with one hand and patting Sakura on the back with the other, “Thank you for the endorsement. If it comes to that, I'll let you know.”

The irony in his voice was sharp enough to cut her in half. But when she felt brave enough to peek up at him through her eyelashes, Sakura saw that Itachi was not nearly as unaffected as he sounded. In fact, he looked more than a little flustered. It might've just been the alcohol, but his face had flushed a deep rose color, and he'd stopped making eye contact with her in favor of scanning the bar's snack menu.

“You should eat something,” Itachi said. His thoughts raced around his mind like a train off its tracks; he wasn't entirely sure *what* he was feeling at the moment, but it was fast, powerful, on fire, and headed for a cliff. A distraction was in order. Something drastic, because under no circumstances was he going to keep sitting here with Sakura and talk to her about Those Sorts of Things. She was a nice girl underneath all the yelling and punching—sweet, and a little innocent despite the things she'd been through—it just wouldn't be proper.

He ordered fifteen sticks of dango.

“God,” Sakura said through a mouthful of strawberry-glaze and pillowy rice cakes. “Why does everything taste so much better when you're shitfaced?”

Itachi watched Sakura reach for her seventh stick. “Don’t you think you’ve had enough?”

Sakura gave him a wicked look; Itachi would not have inquired after her thoughts for all the money and power in the world.

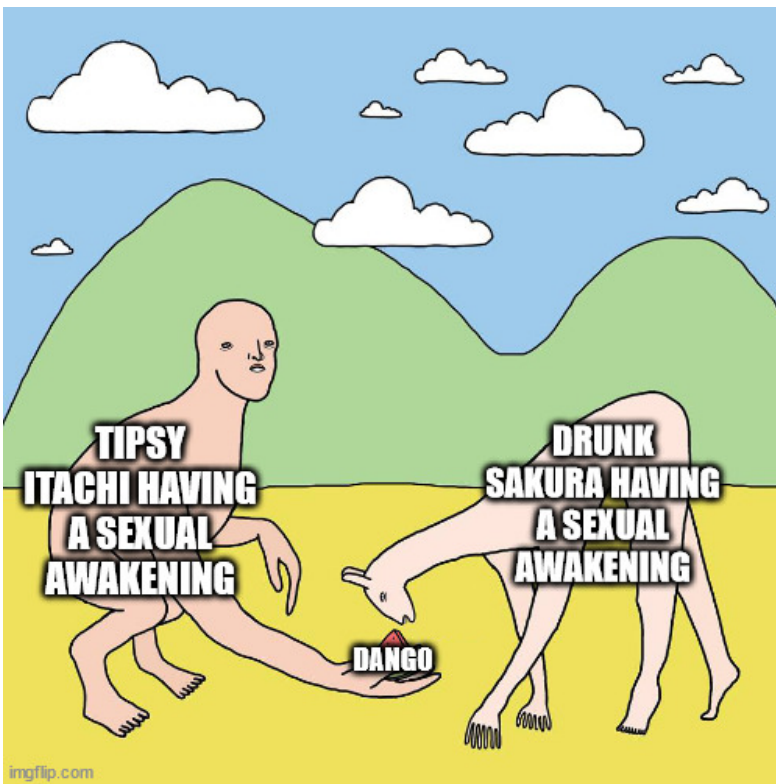
“Enough of what?” she said. “The alcohol, the dango, or you?” She took the dango stick out of his hand, the tips of her fingers dragging across the back of his fingers. Her touch was so soft, and yet so much like claws on raw, exposed skin.

She put the stick in her mouth, down her throat, all the way to where her hand gripped the base, and then pulled it out with exaggerated sluggishness—clean. A tiny drop of soy glaze sat at the corner of her mouth; she wiped it away with her little finger, and then licked it up.

“None of the above.”

Oh, this was not good.

Chapter End Notes



1. when Sakura almost turned into a tree were you like oh my god I see where this is going the rest of the story is going to be about her being a tree because I did
2. that dude is going to leave the guest wing wrecked and charge people to see it. king
3. what is your favorite cringe moment for Sakura this chapter, there are so many please take your time

canon Sakura is nasty as fuck and I love that for her

I tried to care for the fierce marsh bird, wings full of lead

Chapter Summary

In this chapter Itachi writes 50 Shades of Gray and Jiraiya has a come-to-Jesus conversation with his cringy fail son and also Sakura is here

Chapter Notes

Cw: Heartwarming! This chapter has the word “slut” in it TEN whole times (at least)

Also Cw: Hidan is in this chapter so he hits the following triggers in a single sentence: murder, revenge killing, misogyny, slut-shaming, sexual assault, torture, necrophilia. Look at him go!

The Itachi and Jiraiya back and forth in italics is meant to convey written conversation in the margins of Jiraiya’s first drafts. It’ll make sense when you get there.

Anyway this chapter is about accepting your sexuality as a normal natural part of who you are and how denying your sexual feelings (or lack thereof) rather than processing them will make you go batshit wild in a bad way. Sexual self-judgement is a slow-acting poison. Sakura is weird and horny and I want her to be PROUD of that.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

P. bulbosa

P. bulbosa



schwebende Blüthenblätter
schwebende Blüthenblätter

P. bulbosa
P. bulbosa
P. bulbosa

Ophrys apifera

Bee orchid

For no particular reason, today I looked through the Uchiha plant catalog to find flowers that reproduce through what is apparently called “sexual deception.” The bee orchid, native throughout the continent except in desert and arctic biomes, evolved to look and smell like a bee in order to attract bees that try to have sex with the fake bee. By way of the deceived bee’s vigorous activities, the bee orchid will achieve pollination. In other parts of the world, these orchids pollinate themselves; bee orchids in the Land of Fire’s northern grasslands, however, are pollinated almost exclusively by one species of solitary bee. I took a field trip to the area and observed multiple male bees attempting to mate with the flower. Obviously, the flower is the only creature that benefits from this interaction; the bee’s efforts will come to nothing, as the bee orchid can only supply nourishment in return and not potential offspring. I myself relate to this orchid, as I too have attempted to find mates by trying too hard to be something I’m not.

I’d let him do butt stuff to me.

What in the FUCKING fuck is wrong with me

Stop it. STOP IT

Itachi Uchiha (18)

Year of Unwelcome Feelings, Month 1

Ambush

The days of long, meandering journeys from one lead to the next

ended the instant Sakura's physical assessment concluded in the Land of Hot Water. Even as Sakura returned with Tenzo and her retinue back to Konoha, Itachi and Jiraiya went on the offensive with the singular goal of finding White Zetsu's home base. Ideally, they'd find him without his other half and execute him. One objective down, many more to go—but this quarry was worth the concentrated attention. Even if he'd had nothing to do with Sakura's powers, his attention on her, as well as his ominous words, gave the Fourth enough reason to prioritize his destruction.

Tenzo himself provided the first clue. After another analysis of the guest wing—supervised by the minor Lord, whose delight at the scandal was palpable by all—Tenzo uncovered a network of stubborn roots that bore traces of White Zetsu's unique chakra signature. While he'd been unable to sense the source of the miles-long root network, he detected a hot spot in the Land of Valleys so intense that the roots seemed to shudder under the weight of the accumulated energy. Itachi and Jiraiya advanced on the little nation, taking as little time as they could spare to rest or sleep.

“Pop quiz,” Jiraiya said on day four. “What's our first target?”

“The village of Tsuta. There's a cave system just outside it that we should check first.”

Because a cave system was the sort of place a terrorist organization might hunker down in, especially if that system were large enough to, say, allow Pain to summon the statue used for extracting tailed beasts from their hosts. It would certainly explain the massive spikes in chakra that the roots had uncovered. That, and it just so happened that the Akatsuki had already used that very cave system for that very purpose—in the other world, at least.

“Bingo, kid. When we get done out here, I want the local weather reports to read nothing but blue skies for days, baby.”

“Okay.”

“You know, because they have the red clouds on their little jackets. So we clean them out, and there’s no clouds anymore. That’s the joke.”

“Ah.”

“Clear skies.”

“Yes.”

“You’re not laughing.”

“It isn’t funny.”

Icha Icha Lost at Sea [Draft]

A tale of adventure and romance by Jiraiya the Toad Sage

Uchiha. Why do you keep crossing out entire paragraphs?? I asked you to do some light editing, not rewrite the whole fucking book.

Editing involves identifying areas in need of refinement, does it not?

What the hell is so wrong with this scene that you need to cut it in half?

You spent ten sentences describing a character walking across a room.

Okay?? They walked across the room.

*Do your readers need to know that? What does walking across the room
have to do with the character development or plot?*

SETTING.

*Is the species of tree that produced the floorboards a critical element of the
setting?*

*You are so fucking ungrateful. Everything I have done for you and this is
how you treat me. I'm not buying you any more ice cream.*

Okay.

They weren't quick enough to stop the tailed beast rituals. The extraction statue was gone, already de-summoned by Pain and tucked away in its dimensional hiding place. This time, there'd been two extractions back to back: Kokuo, who the locals reported had been without a vessel and brought into the caverns by force, and Chomei, whose vessel had been a young girl from the Land of Waterfalls; Akatsuki had been busy. It was the girl's body that Jiraiya and Itachi discovered first in the mountainous cavern north of Tsuta, followed immediately by the discovery of Hidan, who announced his presence

with a broad swipe of his triple-bladed scythe.

“Hey, hey, no gatecrashers allowed. This ain’t a goddamn social club.” The scythe missed them, of course, but Hidan hadn’t intended it to land; he tended to corral his opponents where he wanted them before going on the offensive.

Kakuzu came at them from behind, blocking the cavern’s entrance; black threads crept out from the hemline and sleeves of his cloak, swaying in the air with deceptive calm.

“Ah, Jiraiya the Toad Sage,” he said. “*And* an Uchiha. You’ll fetch a nice price.”

Jiraiya and Itachi leapt to one side of the cavern, keeping the wall to their backs.

“The Zombie Twins, huh? Nice.” Jiraiya studied their opponents, eventually settling his attention on Hidan. Most people did. “And what do we know about our unexpected guests, my learned student?”

Itachi considered Kakuzu the bigger threat—even if the man was ancient, he was still powerful; ego, as much as the strength of his attackers, had killed his otherworld counterpart. Hidan made for much easier prey so long as his abilities were known. It would be best to tell Jiraiya upfront, even though Itachi was certain the ability had been outlined in Orochimaru’s bingo book. He was pretty sure, at least. Either way, a reminder wouldn’t hurt. He could always write off the information later as another tip.

“Don’t let that one come into contact with your blood.” Reflexively, Itachi cut his palm and summoned Kosuke. Keeping his hand close to his body to contain the blood; he healed the tiny wound with a basic

first aid technique Sakura had insisted he learn. Unfortunately, his chakra wasn't nearly as agreeable as hers; it burned like hell but did its job: the wound closed up. "He performs a religious ritual that connects his body with yours. Ingesting a drop of your blood is all it takes."

"Just what the world needs." Jiraiya straightened up and folded his arms: a subtle gesture of relaxation tailor-made to irritate Hidan's pride. "More religious nuts."

"Hey, fuck you, man," Hidan shouted. He brandished his scythe threateningly, mowing down hundreds of imaginary foes before him. What a different sort of life Hidan might have had if he'd gone into agriculture instead of mass murder. Well, Itachi thought, it wasn't as though he was in any position to judge the latter occupation.

"He's right, Hidan." Kakuzu reached for the clasp on his cloak, releasing it onto the floor. The threads criss-crossing his body loosened, the masks beginning to detach as he prepared for battle.

"Well, fuck you too, asshole!"

"We're taking them straight to the bounty office, you understand. No mangling the corpses."

Hidan threw his scythe at Kakuzu, who caught it in one blackened, iron-tough hand. "You're a little bitch, you know that?"

"You've mentioned."

Itachi wanted to sigh with relief. Normality. Familiarity. At last: a cut

and dry fight—one unlikely to end with more heart-stricken curse seals, given Hidan and Kakuzu's unique abilities. Itachi doubted either of their hearts—in Kakuzu's case, multiple—would host a curse seal for too long. Itachi gave Kosuke a meaningful glance; the toad hunkered down and began to emit a series of infrasonic sounds that Itachi could feel rattling in his bones; Kosuke's outline blurred, then disappeared. While Itachi and Jiraiya engaged in the battle overtly, Kosuke would provide genjutsu support from the sidelines.

The battle itself was not noteworthy. Jiraiya's presence alone tipped the odds in Itachi's favor. And the information gleaned from the cavern itself—the identities of the extracted beasts, the victim, and confirmation of Akatsuki activities—would be far more valuable than killing or attempting to capture Kakuzu and Hidan. Regardless, Jiraiya and Itachi gave the fight their all. Kakuzu, sensing the fight would not favor him, and being the Live to Chase Bounties Another Day sort, retreated early on. Jiraiya let him, and he and Itachi focused all of their attention on Hidan. Between the Sharingan, Kosuke's incessant genjutsu assaults, and Jiraiya boxing Hidan in with needle-sharp barbs of white hair, Jashin's stupidest acolyte went down in less than five minutes.

"When I get free, I'm going to rip off your head and skullfuck you in front of your stupid pink-haired cumslut, and then I'm going to rip off *her* head and skullfuck *her*," was all Hidan had to say of the matter. The words were somewhat defanged, spoken as they were by a decapitated head lying on its side in a pool of Jiraiya's toad oil.

"You do that." Itachi stored Hidan's head in one scroll; Jiraiya handled the rest of the body.

"Nice guy. Probably got a wife, a kid, two-and-a-half dogs, and a white picket fence out there. Or is that two-and-a-half kids?"

"In Hidan's case, they're probably all halves."

Jiraiya dropped the scythe. “Uchiha, was that a joke? Did I hear that right?”

“Must’ve been the wind.”

“This is my greatest contribution to humanity: an Uchiha with a sense of humor.”

“We should report to the Hokage. He’ll want to know the mokuton could be useful in locating future extraction events.”

“Not before we report to the nearest bar for a round of drinks.” Jiraiya shook his head. “Uchihas telling jokes. Never thought I’d live to see the day.”

“Maybe you won’t. The sun isn’t up yet and I’ve still got chakra to burn.”

“Twice!”

Icha Icha Lost at Sea [Draft]

A tale of adventure and romance by Jiraiya the Toad Sage

Give me my god damn adverbs back

They're not bad! They're just words!!

True on both counts. Sometimes an adverb is not only the sensible choice but the best one. But your particular use of them is not always necessary. What does 'he smiled sluttily' even mean?

He's smiling like a slut where is the confusion happening in your pea brain

How does a slut smile? Is quantified sluttiness part of the universal human zeitgeist? Just describe the way he's smiling, or depict some other body language if you are trying to convey sexual intent.

I'll convey a kick to your balls

mmk

Sakura Haruno (17)

Year of Shameful Lusts, Month 5

Bambusa balcooa

It was not accurate to say that Sakura had never grown up—not in the literal sense, anyway. In the other world, Sakura had lived long enough to see her seventeenth birthday and a few months after. But in the personal sense—on some deep, profound level where self-actualization lived—Sakura had never grown up at all. As far as

Sakura was concerned, she'd been a child for twelve years, and then the day she'd taken on the fateful escort mission with Team 7, she became an adult. Adults drew blood. Adults killed, and watched others be killed. Adults pushed past silly things like physical limitations, emotional turmoil, and tragedy because that was what adults *did*.

By the time the Fourth War came around, Sakura had been an adult for many, many years—in fact, by the time she died, Sakura had considered herself a bit old. For her occupation—statistically, anyway—she'd been middle aged. But *growing up* had never happened; there were no coming-of-age birthday parties, no stupid fights with friends, no terrible dates to recall, giggling, with friends. There was only death, blood, pain, and fleeting moments of happiness.

Here, in this new world, though? Sakura grew up. And all of the adolescent things she'd only ever seen on TV were suddenly hers to experience: she'd had birthday parties every year, and she'd gotten into a fight with Sasuke over whose kunai were whose just yesterday. Normal. And while she hadn't been on any dates (much less terrible ones,) she'd had several outings with Itachi that were so close to dates that Sakura called them as such in her journal. Sakura was normal. Sakura took time for herself. Sakura helped out in the trauma ward because she could, not because she had to. Sakura hung out with Sasuke for fun.

And Sakura received invitations to dine with the Hokage and his family, just for being who she was.

“And how's your training going?” Kushina passed Sakura a plate full of fried pork turnovers. Sakura had already eaten three, but Kushina favored the everyone-leaves-stuffed type of hosting. “No more trouble with the seal?”

“None.” Sakura took the smallest turnover she could see, and tapped the hexagonal Byakugou on her forehead with a clean finger. “I went

back to storing my own chakra. It just reformed last month. I'm working on getting a second seal going. The mokuton is tricky. It has a mind of its own, almost. Making it do something it doesn't want to do is damn near impossible, even if I feed more of my chakra into it. The First must've been some kind of forest sprite or something."

"He does have the face for it, doesn't he?"

Minato concurred through a mouthful of noodles. Kushina snuck two more turnovers onto his plate.

"You're probably tired of this..." Kushina leaned forward with a twinkle in her eye. "But can I have another demonstration?"

Naruto, who'd been surreptitiously napping at the other end of the table, sat up with a snort. Minato shot him a disapproving look, but even he couldn't hide his interest. The mokuton was Konoha's unofficial official party trick.

"What would you like to see?"

"Why don't you do..." Kushina glanced around the kitchen. "You know, I could really use a new wooden spatula."

Naruto sputtered. "You want—a spatula? She could do anything, and you want a spatula."

"I need another one!"

Sakura held up her hands, already reaching for the warm, life energy that sat in her chest. “It’s okay; actually, this is more advanced than it looks.” She pulled gently at a bamboo seed in her pocket, feeling for its sleepy core, coaxing it into a sprout that she then held in the palms of her hands. While she knew now how to generate wood from her own body, it tired her out significantly, and making anything other than vinewood was still an ordeal.

“Whoa,” Naruto said. His eyes followed the sprout as it grew up, and up, and then thickened. As the bamboo developed, Sakura narrated.

“It starts out as young, green, and flexible—” She made the thin branches wave to accentuate the point. “But as I accelerate the growth, it takes on the quality of a hardwood tree. The trick is getting it to stay small while still benefiting from the sturdiness of old growth.” A section of the stalk toughened; Sakura continued working on that space, while the rest of the bamboo began withering. “Now I tell it what shape I want it to be.” Pieces of the stalk shuddered and fell away; gradually, the wood formed a spoonlike shape that Sakura refined into a flat, diagonally cut spatula.

Kushina reached out and touched the utensil. “Is it done?”

“Not yet. I have to kill it first.”

Kushina sat back down, hard. “You have to...?”

“Yes. It’s live growth. It would try to turn into a tree again. If you want it to stay a spatula, I have to kill it.” Sakura inhaled, tightened her hold on the spatula’s life energy, and then tore it to pieces with a burst of chakra. The spatula shuddered one final time, and then grew still. Sakura placed it on the table in front of her. Kushina picked it up with great reverence.

“Wow,” she said. “That’s a lot. When you—do you feel it die?”

She did. “Yes.”

“Is it hard doing that?”

Every time. More and more each time she did it. In some ways, it felt like killing a sapient creature. Sakura nudged tiny forms into life, and then extinguished them to serve a purpose. It happened all the time, everywhere, every day, and Sakura knew that in many cases, it was necessary—the wooden bridge she’d helped build for a village recovering from a mudslide saved hundreds of people from cholera and typhoid fever. Human lives were far more important to her—there was never a question what the right choice had been—but lives were still lives, and everything living wanted to keep living. The knowledge that she had sacrificed a life, even one as simple as a plant’s, ingrained itself in Sakura’s mind. Tenzo said the sting of it would never go away. He said it ought not to.

“It is, yes.”

“Damn. That’s heavy. I’ll try and use it every day.”

Kushina went to put the spatula in the utensil jar on her counter. Naruto’s Hot Dad changed the subject to something less morbid.

“Your birthday is coming up, isn’t it?”

“That’s right; I’ll be eighteen in March.”

“How are you planning on spending it? Is eighteen an important age in Honey?”

“Seventeen is our big year, actually. It’s the traditional age of adulthood and has been for some time. There’s a big party.”

Sakura’s seventeenth birthday party had been unfathomably enormous, actually, and there were some days Sakura could swear she was still hungover from it, nearly a year later. When Honey partied, they went *hard*. The Land of Fire followed Senju traditions for growing up; in Konoha, fifteen marked legal adulthood. The Uchiha drew the line for adulthood between thirteen and fourteen; this was purely ceremonial, according to Fugaku—nobody expected fourteen-year-olds to strike out on their own. The Uchiha considered themselves a socially progressive clan, after all: things like marriage were totally off the table for Uchiha aged fourteen. In this way, they differed from most other Konoha families; it wasn’t unheard of for fifteen-year-olds to marry, especially out of the more noble clans. Hinata had been married to a young lord from the Land of Tea for two years now, and she was already pregnant.

“Ah, that’s right.” Minato returned the turnover to the serving plate so quickly his hands were a blur. “So you’re an adult two times over: once for us, and once for them. Itachi as well. Does that mean you’ll marry soon?”

Sakura choked on her wine. Minato passed her a napkin.

“I, uh.” Sakura patted her face dry. “I mean...I’m not sure. There’s been—I just...so, no one ever actually told me—because in Honey, they don’t plan that far ahead for weddings—”

Minato held up his hands. “Sorry, that came out of nowhere.”

Sakura’s face burned. “I haven’t really thought about it.”

Liar, liar. She *had* thought about it. She’d been thinking about it every day, and most nights, for weeks now. Some time away from Itachi would do wonders for her crush, she’d thought. After a while, she’d forget about what his body did to hers. But then he’d come back to Konoha for the briefest of moments a month ago, and took the time to say hello in person. And there was no mistaking it: Itachi was not a boy anymore—he was a man. A very handsome man, with nice shoulders, gentle hands, a voice rich as caramel, and an ass so tight there ought to have been a law against taking it out in public. She wanted to touch that ass so bad—and also the rest of him.

Sakura had spent that night crying naked in bed, the next night *not* touching herself, and the following five days spying on Naruto’s Hot Dad because *surely* fixating obsessively on another man would cure her. It did not cure her. And it was not fair. Sakura was Sakura, and Itachi was... *him*. It made no sense. *It was not fair.*

“You’re still growing up.” Kushina put the turnover back on Minato’s plate. “You have all the time in the world to think about it.”

But not nearly enough time in the world to keep from falling in love. Sakura could feel her heart bounding towards love like an excitable dog dragging her along by the leash. Before long, she’d reach a point of no return, and then...and then...and then what? There was no way of knowing. Falling in love with Itachi had not been in Sakura’s cards in the other world. Here, she had no cheat sheet—not even an outline of one, or a hint, or anything—just the great and terrible unknown.

Icha Icha Lost at Sea [Draft]

A tale of adventure and romance by Jiraiya the Toad Sage

Verbs now?? Is nothing sacred???

This character has coughed, giggled, chortled, yelled, sighed, exclaimed, whimpered, whispered, shouted, cried, quipped, proclaimed, screamed, and cooed—all in a span of two pages. Can't they just say things once in a while?

I'm being ACCURATE and SPECIFIC.

Accurate? Really? So she's actually shouting? She's hiding under a table from an assassin, and she's shouting? Shouting and then screaming? Really? That's what she's doing?

Go fuck yourself.

k

Sakura Haruno (18)

Year of Shameful Lusts, Month 7

Gleditsia triacanthos

“Hey, Sasuke.”

Sasuke looked up from his desk. In the past year, he’d graduated to having his own broom-closet-sized office, one with a nameplate on the doorframe and everything. No sharing with anyone else. The desk was meticulously neat—far neater than Sakura had ever kept hers—and featured five potted plants in various stages of life. The slug was new.

“You got the contract?”

The mini-Katsuyu wiggled her eyestalks.

“Last week, yeah.” Sasuke pulled up an inverted bucket for Sakura to sit on.

“What’s it been like working with Lady Tsunade? Does she throw baseballs at you?”

“It’s been...challenging. We don’t approach problems the same way, and we’re both stubborn as hell. But she’s always willing to meet in the middle and let me try things my way as long as it doesn’t involve property damage. *Extensive* property damage, I should say.”

“Burned down a lab, huh?”

“I exploded a lab, Sakura. There’s a difference. That was Old Sasuke, anyway. New Sasuke just completed a lightning technique capable of assessing nerve damage a thousand times faster *and* ten times more accurately than the standard methods. Grandma Senju was most pleased. This one’s getting published and everything. New Sasuke has entered the big leagues.”

Sakura laughed. “She lets you get away with calling her that?”

“I let her get away with calling me Little Duckling. It’s a compromise.”

“You’ve been working on that technique for years. How did you manage to finish it?”

“Changing my perspective. I was fighting against my chakra nature, trying to force it where I wanted it, when what I should’ve been doing was paying attention to where it wanted to go. Like you said, the human body is full of electricity. Once I gave up controlling the direction and focused on power output, it practically did the work for me. I have to be more careful about where I apply it than I was before, and I need to be extra careful about how much power I give it—I’m still not going anywhere near the heart—but letting it tell me where it wanted to go solved most of my problems. The lightning keeps going until it reaches a damaged nerve, its pattern changes unexpectedly, and then I know where the issue is, what it looks like, and how bad it is.”

“Sasuke, that’s so fucking cool.”

Sasuke went pink in the cheeks. “I mean, anybody could’ve done it.”

“Could’ve, maybe. But you’re the one who actually did it. I’m taking you out to lunch. You wanna go back to the place with the tiny sandwiches?”

“I dream of going back to the place with the tiny sandwiches.”

They ordered one of each sandwich. Sakura sorted her sandwiches into groups, almost without thinking—spreads versus salads, white versus dark bread, crust and no crust—thinking in circles. Paying attention to where it wanted to go...where it wanted to go...where did the mokuton want to go?

After lunch, Sakura waved Sasuke goodbye and headed straight for the Senju Forest, all the way to the grove of trees-that-had-been-people. Their sleepy murmurs were unchanged: like last time, their awareness just barely exceeded a normal plant's—they did not respond to her questions, and their “speech” was more plantlike than human.

Sakura stood up, brushed the dirt from her clothes, and tiptoed beyond the grove, heading west—into deeper, darker woods. *Have you been to the heart of the Forest?* Matsutaro Senju's words haunted her still, three years after he'd uttered them. Later, when Sakura had questions, Tenzo hadn't exactly shut her down, but he was insistent that the deepest, darkest part of the woods held nothing but unfathomable danger. The trees themselves knew: as Sakura walked, the path narrowed until she was picking her way over roots and around branches that refused to budge no matter what she did. Listening to the trees suggested that they, too, had once been Senju—but these were far more silent than their cousins closer to the Forest's edge.

Frustrated, she punched the closest trunk and sent a bolt of chakra straight into the tree's life force...which shrunk away from her and then snapped back like a rubber band, breaking the connection between girl and plant with a tree's version of a sucker punch. Sakura fell back on her ass and held her head in her hands, ears ringing.

“Fuck...the fuck was that?”

She couldn't remember anything like *that* happening during her training. Plants ignored her sometimes, but they never brushed her

off. Sakura tried again, gentler this time. Again, the tree rejected her, albeit in a far mellower fashion: it closed the door firmly, but politely, in her face. As the last echo of the trees slipped from her grasp, Sakura heard it again—that familiar voice from the last time she’d reached too far beyond her limits.

Not like that, either. Keep trying. There’s a better way. You should get better at this. I am sad. Do you feel how sad I am?

A shower of leaves fell from the canopy onto the undergrowth where Sakura stood. Their broad, fan-shaped profile slowed their ascent, so much so that the cascade bore the appearance of a green, windless snowfall. Sakura left the Forest, went straight to her bedroom, pulled out her journal, and started writing.

Itachi Uchiha (19)

Year of Unwelcome Feelings, Month 9

Surrender

“You good?”

Itachi looked up from his drink. Gin, neat, room temperature: a sure sign of an impending breakdown as any. He found Jiraiya’s face in the low, pulsing lights and scrutinized the man, taking measure of the exhaustion written there.

“As good as I can be, I suppose.”

They'd been hunting White Zetsu in earnest for over a month, with nothing whatsoever to show for it. Reports of sightings weren't hard to come by—but that was precisely the reason for their trouble. It was clear by now that Akatsuki, or perhaps White Zetsu alone, knew what Itachi and Jiraiya were after and intended to overwhelm them with false intel. So far, the false leads were doing their job: Itachi and Jiraiya both were tired, demoralized, and irritable—Jiraiya enough to slough off his usual boisterous attitude, and Itachi enough to recommend a trip to a local brothel.

Combined stress and downtime had worn Itachi down to the bone, laying bare repressed thoughts he had little desire to examine. A letter from Sakura preserved Itachi's thoughts in stone: reading what appeared to be a dry rundown of her personal goings on, Itachi hadn't been able to stop thinking of their last encounter—the things Sakura had said and the sensual look in her eyes when she'd pushed back on his hesitation. He thought of her body—soft skin over wiry muscle, and the smooth transition from neck to breast to stomach that her clothing, despite its modest appearance, did not hide. After that night, Itachi had thrown himself into his work; that was his primary response to feeling overwhelmed. But bereft of martial distractions, Itachi dove into physical relief of an entirely different sort—and now they were here, by his own suggestion.

“Didn’t think you’d be into this sort of thing, kid.”

“Why not?”

“Obviously *I’m* not judging—that’d be a lot, coming from me—but you’ve been a little off lately. Maybe you oughta think this through before you do something you regret.”

“That is a lot, coming from you.”

Jiraiya clicked his tongue, took a long pull from his mimosa pitcher, and met Itachi's tight expression with one of his own.

"Your girl know you're here?"

"She gave me explicit consent, actually. This doesn't concern her."

"Ah." Jiraiya gestured at Itachi with the pitcher. The liquid sloshed threateningly, but stayed off the table—for now. "See, that's where you're full of shit."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Jiraiya opened his mouth. Closed it. Paused. Switched gears. "You know what this is really about, kid?"

"It's about sex, isn't it? I'm not inexperienced, if that's what you're implying." Far from it. The day of his sixteenth birthday—his first sixteenth birthday—Kisame had dropped Itachi off at a Certain Establishment in the Land of Keys and said he'd be back in half an hour. It had been an educational—and awkward—ascent into the wonderful world of intercourse. It had lasted five minutes.

"No, no, kid—you don't—no. This?" Jiraiya pointed through the curtains separating their booth from the rest of the main floor. "*This* is about running away. From your problems, from boredom, from reality. Some people can do it for fun and it doesn't fuck 'em up one bit. Good for them. But that's not everybody. That's why all the old timers are always harping on the gambling and the drinking and the whoring. It's not about the things themselves. It's about what they *signify*. The siren song isn't about the siren, kid—it's about the song. It's about why you jumped off of that boat, not what's waiting for you on that rock. Jumping is what defines you. Understand?"

“Sure.” He didn’t want to. “People seek pleasures of the flesh to cope with difficulty. They see an easy out, or a facsimile of salvation or joy, and move towards it. I don’t see what that has to do with me, though. I don’t have the sorts of problems this establishment could cure in the first place.”

“You *still* don’t know what I’m talking about?” Jiraiya sat low in the booth, his eyes tired, slumped over like an old man. He looked his age. “Kid, what’s going on in your life that could get to you so bad that you’d jump into a stormy sea? Come on. What are you trying to get away from?”

“This conversation.”

“Fucking hell.” Jiraiya put a hand over his face. “Kid, do you know what my greatest failure as a teacher is?”

“Your reliance on circuitous metaphors to convey meaning?”

“Fuck off. It’s this: that after all we’ve done together, and all I’ve taught you, you still can’t take a *fucking* hint from the universe. Go. Pick one of these nice ladies out from the lineup. Get a room. And you’ll see exactly what I mean.”

Itachi downed the rest of his drink, ignoring the sting of icy, undiluted liquor. Gin always went down like medicine. The madam smiled when he approached her at the bar, and led him to the dark corner where the girls waited, their bodies made wafish and haunting underneath the flickering lights. For a week’s wages, Itachi took the nearest girl by the hand and led her away, avoiding a backward glance into the room he’d departed, avoiding looking at the girl even more.

“You seem tense. Is everything all right?”

The girl put her hand on Itachi’s arm, forward but still polite. She closed in on him, pressing against his body in open invitation. Itachi put a hand on her shoulder, eyes lit upon the ground to keep himself from seeing the fullness of the room, ignoring the sick feeling building in his belly. It was something to get out of his system: this unhealthy obsession with a person who was not, could not be, his—not really, not ever. A curl of long hair escaped the girl’s bobby pins, falling across his wrist—

pink.

Itachi looked up. Pink hair, green eyes, soft skin, small breasts above a small waist, delicate features—no lean muscle, but if there had been...

“Are you all right?”

But he’d barely *glanced* at her—

“I apologize.” His own voice sounded far away, and so weak as to be alarming. “I think I’ve made a mistake.”

Sakura Haruno (18)

Year of Shameful Lusts, Month 10

Panax ginseng

Icha Icha Lost at Sea

A tale of adventure and romance by Jiraiya the Toad Sage

Ume relinquished six newly-flaccid inches from her quivering throat to turn her attention toward yet another group of crewmen. Perhaps, Ume thought, her exhausted mind giddy at the possibilities afforded by the lanky sailor's crude prosthetic, this fourth triumvirate of seamen would finally offer her the satisfaction she desperately craved. The foreman of this bunch, a squat character whose tongue poked out behind a gold tooth, swaggered up and opened his mouth to speak.

"So here's the little stowaway that's been keeping my crew from completing a lick of work."

The voice wasn't his. In fact, the announcement emanated from behind the would-be cunnilinguist and cast a silence across the deck. Gingerly, the crew crowded to the gunwales to reveal a tall woman. A too-small and clearly stolen admiral's cap perched precariously on curly, silver locks that dangled to her waist. This badge of office proved superfluous, however. Everything from the imperious gaze of her crystal-blue eyes to the sharp clack of her knee-high boots as they walked toward Ume communicated to all present that this woman gave the orders here and would tolerate no insubordination.

The smoky alto continued, "We don't take kindly to uninvited guests here. And there's only one punishment for that." She reached down and picked up a thick rope in both hands, brandishing a bight with menace and a terrible grin.

This sudden turn of events set Ume's mind racing. Were they going to kill her? She instinctively threw her hands in the air and closed her eyes in frail resistance to the steady cadence of the approaching boots. She felt the

rough rope press against her airbourne wrists, binding them to the mast behind them. A hand reached out and grabbed Ume's chin like a vise, soft skin clutching soft skin. What followed next was a surprise, however; a kiss, firm but gentle and literally taking her breath away.

Ume had made love before. The pint of cum seeping from between her legs was more than testament to that. But no one had ever made her feel like this . A wave of desperate arousal cascaded through Ume's body. Wrists strained against rope as Ume opened her eyes and struggled to make contact with this stranger, this captain of lust, whose lips now hung tantalizingly out of reach from hers. She had to have more.

"Oh," the woman said, "first you sneak onto my boat and now you have the audacity to demand a kiss? I'm afraid your punishment just doubled, dearie." With a snap of her fingers she signaled a pair of sailors to grab her legs and thrust them up above her head, exposing her rump to the cool night air. The captain ran a sharp fingernail across her exposed cheeks and gave Ume a disapproving look.

"Well darling, these aren't nearly pink enough."

She held out a hand into which a third sailor deposited the broken paddle end of an oar. On it, Ume could make out words carved in jagged letters: "FOR STOWAWAYS, DRUNKARDS, AND SLUTS."

The captain made eye contact with Ume as she ran a delicate finger down her cum-sticky thigh. "So do you want another kiss?"

"Yes, p-please, I need to feel your lips again."

"Do you want me to stop there?" The captain licked her lips and grimaced. "Or do you want me to show your pretty little hide something these men on my crew will never truly understand?"

Ume stared into the captain's eyes with an intense longing. Words escaped her in the agony of her desire. She could return only a brief but decisive nod.

The captain held the oar ready.

"Beg for it."

A raft of yellow hair floated into Sakura's peripheral vision. "Whatcha readin', Sakura?"

Sakura screamed, and threw Jiraiya's latest and greatest romance novel with all of her might: a tale of two star-crossed lovers lost at sea, cutting through the air towards the bushes at the speed of sound. She hadn't been *reading* it, obviously—reading Icha Icha was for weirdos like Kakashi and sexually repressed housewives—but she had, admittedly, picked it up off the display outside her favorite book store and cracked it open. The first hundred pages didn't even really count as "reading."

"Nothing! I'm reading nothing! Oh my god, Naruto, why are you even here? Don't you have shit to do?"

"Dude, chill." A second Naruto climbed out of the hedges, the dirt-smudged book clutched in his hands. "I'm just asking. This is Toad Slut's new book, right?"

"He lets you call him that?"

“No.” Naruto’s clone passed the book to Naruto Prime, who began leafing through the pages. “How far did you get?”

“I wasn’t reading it.”

“But like how far did you get, though.”

“I, um. The rescue. They were having sex on deck and there was this big wave...”

“Yeah, yeah, and she goes overboard and climbs back on and then the whole crew starts fucking each other but then she asks them to gangbang her. And they do. Naturally.”

“It’s...yeah. Yeah.”

Naruto waggled his eyebrows. “You know what *I* know? Itachi wrote that part. He wrote that whole scene.”

Sakura gasped, startling a nearby flock of birds into flight. “Wha—no, he *fucking* didn’t. Naruto, no he didn’t. Why would you even *say* that? What the hell is wrong with you?”

“You see this?” Naruto tapped a shiny, embossed gold medal on the cover. “This is Toad Slut’s first book to win an actual award. And it’s because Itachi started editing for him.”

“No fucking way.”

“Yes fucking way. The old man’s deadline was getting close, and he and Itachi were so busy that there was no time to send it to his normal editor. So he made Itachi do it. But Itachi thought the whole draft sucked so he basically rewrote half of it. Toad Slut was *pissed* when his publisher told him about the award. His stuff always sold well because, you know, porn is porn, but this baby put him on the fancy bestseller list that they do out of the capital city. All the high society ladies *love* this book. I think there might be a movie deal. For real.”

“Oh. That’s—oh. But why?”

“I think it just got published at the right time, you know what I mean? The world’s a scary place, and nobody really knows for sure where the fickle hands of fate will guide us next. Sometimes you need encouragement anywhere you can get it. One of those places you can get it is Itachi’s finely crafted pornography.”

“Yeah, that...seems...right. Sure, why not.”

“Itachi just *gets* it, man. He knows what it means to feel alone in a crowd. He knows what it means to feel pushed to the edge of your humanity. It all comes through in his writing. When the main character wasn’t sure if she could handle double penetration, all she had to do was believe that if she let two dudes put it in her ass at the same time that everything would just be okay. And it *was* okay; she killed *all* the werewolf pirates in the next chapter. Itachi could go solo. He kinda wants to, but Toad Slut knows where he sleeps.”

“That is so—wait, how do you *know* all this?”

“Itachi told me about it in his letter.”

Sakura sputtered. “You—you’re just—Itachi is sending *you* letters, now?”

“They’re Sasuke’s letters. I steal them.”

“There is something wrong with you. There is something wrong with *all* of you.”

“Your boyfriend’s kinda spicy, huh? He said Toad Slut has the writing skills of an amoeba with a personality to match. Harsh, but true.”

“Go away. And give me back my fucking book.”

From the illustrious journal of one Sakura Haruno

Hi. Everything is wrong with me. I am very drunk, which is the only reason why I am writing this. But somebody should record this for prosperity just in case Drunk Sakura is onto something.

Anyway I just got done reading the new novel and I got super horny about it and did some things to myself with silicone that would probably get me arrested somewhere. Itachi may or may not have featured in the accompanying fantasy. It’s fine.

The Mangekyo Sharingan activates in situations of extreme distress, classically when the Sharingan user witnesses a loved one die. Lots of big, intense emotions going around. But modern day Uchiha are focusing on, like, love and happiness and stuff to get the Sharingan going, because

maybe it's just the intense feelings and not the badness that matters. Itachi said that this Obito got his Sharingan when he got kissed by a girl he liked.

Here's my thought. What if

What if I gave him head and it was so good that he skipped over the last dot and went straight to big boy Mangekyo Sharingan

I am going to hell

I bet I could suppress my gag reflex with yin chakra

SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP

Itachi Uchiha (19) and Sakura Haruno (18)

Year of Unwelcome Lusts and Shameful Feelings, Month 12

Benisu Island

Itachi's long journey ended with a beautiful ocean sunset. Sitting at a table by the beach, drinking technicolor beverages served in coconuts, he and Sakura met up one final time before Itachi's training period officially ended. There was no information to exchange; this visit was purely personal, and Sakura had come alone. The drinks had been Jiraiya's idea—he'd sent Itachi off with a wink and a note to the bartender to save them premium seats on the patio.

It had to be a fluke, Itachi thought. Yes, he had noticed Sakura's body. Yes, he had watched her down a whole stick of dango without gagging and jerked off about it later that day. And yes, he thought it was kind of hot when she got mean. But those were purely biological urges, and not indicative of *feelings*. This was not love. To feel love, a person first had to be deserving of it. Anything else was just lust, and lust had a timer on it. All Itachi needed to do was wait it out. Fine, he liked looking at Sakura's body. But he also liked admiring the delicate curves of a pavlova. And didn't he have a world to save? There were things to do, and limited time to do them. Sakura's relationship with him was, ultimately, a side note.

Sakura smiled, blushed, and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. And Itachi's heart had to love a good cliché, because that was all it took to light his whole body on fire. Itachi shot the rest of his drink and ordered another. It was not the wisest decision, and would surely result in an increased output of stupid behavior as his blood alcohol content rose, but his other option was opening his mouth and confessing to all sorts of embarrassing things. Death was preferable.

Sakura turned to him. "Did you swallow all of that in one go?"

"Mmm."

A gust of wind blew in from the sea, sending napkins and hats flying. An airborne cloche hit Sakura right in the face, and in the confusion she spilled her cocktail all over herself—it was thick, white from the coconut cream base, and dripped down into her bikini top, leaving streaks on her skin as it moved south.

"God damn it," she muttered. "Now I'm all wet."

Well, there went his evening.

Chapter End Notes

Hey

Hey

They're gonna fuck next chapter. Rating going up. Because of the fucking.

1. thoughts on Itachi's writing career
2. thoughts on what Itachi is going to buy with the movie deal money
3. thoughts on Kushina's new kitchen utensil
4. thoughts on Sakura's total breakdown and concurrent sexual awakening

I was so committed to making the pirate porn excerpt sound different from my own writing that I had my spouse write it

Feeding him the only food I could imagine

Chapter Summary

In this chapter Itachi and Sakura's tongues battle for dominance, only for a third, unaffiliated tongue to overwhelm their troops and force a retreat

Chapter Notes

Enjoy a fight scene so laden with sexual innuendo that it sank trying to ford the river on Oregon Trail (you lose 2 clothes and 1 medicine).

Cw LOADS of internalized misogyny. I do not agree with Sakura's negative thoughts about herself, but they exist, and part of her journey to self-acceptance is dealing with internal and external sexism. Her woes are balanced out and helped along by Honey's EXTREME SEX POSITIVITY.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Four years was not such a long time—one minute, Itachi stood at the gates of Konoha, counting his kunai one last time—one minute later, here he was again, temporarily parting ways with Jiraiya. And it was an eternity, too—centuries ago, he'd pressed a book of plants into Sakura's hands—eons later, he stood at the gates to her family's estate, waffling like an idiot as he decided whether or not he wanted to look Sakura in the eye and tell her what his heart now knew.

Sakura greeted him personally once he gathered the courage to approach the house itself; her head peeked out between the front door and its frame: a face with no body. Itachi took one look at her—hair piled haphazardly atop her head, eyes bright, two hexagonal Byakugou on her forehead, mouth curled around the stick of a lollipop in an inviting smile—and invited her to Konoha's most remote training ground. It was past due, he thought, for the one-on-one fight she'd challenged him to. Physical activity invigorated the mind and

sharpened the senses, and for a shinobi, there were few better ways of assessing one's relationship with another person than barreling towards them at top speed, brandishing a weapon. This was not avoidance, Itachi told himself, but a testing of the waters.

At first he feared she'd forgotten her offhand challenge, but Sakura responded to his request with delight. She threw the door open, revealing her wardrobe for the day: training clothes, in her standard yellow and black.

"I was just about to come get you," she said. "Let's go."

The walk to the training ground was its own eternity; Itachi followed behind while Sakura led, glancing rather shamelessly now and again at the swell between waist and shapely backside. He wanted the walk to last forever—it represented a soft, liminal space that only Itachi was aware of: the transition between friendship and...something else. Something worse, maybe. Or something better. Anything but more of the same.

Standing ten meters apart, they faced off, readying their respective weapons: Itachi his eyes, sword, seals; Sakura her fists, roots, and pollen cloud.

"You're not allergic to black iris, are you? I'm here to beat your ass, not kill you." The ground around her feet buckled as more and more roots poked up out of the soil: broad sections of larger roots all the way down to tiny tendrils Itachi knew he would not have seen without his Sharingan.

"If I am, I'll find out today."

"Good enough for me." She lifted her hands. The roots tore their

sinewy bodies out of the ground with enough force that the earth shuddered beneath Itachi's feet; the pollen cloud thickened, encircling the area in a ring.

Sakura went for him head-on. Of course, she knew better than to look him in the eye—but Itachi was impressed with her ferocity regardless. The roots controlled the ground, the pollen controlled the sky, and Sakura herself controlled the space between. Before he met her, Itachi would not have given a second thought to the possibility of losing to her in a fight. Now, he wasn't so sure. It wasn't just the lack of the Mangekyo or even the presence of the mokuton that made Sakura a bigger threat—it was in the way she carried herself in battle. The rage was still there; training with Tenzo had not tamed her fury but refined it, honing it into a precision weapon wielded expertly by the one who knew it best.

“Ha!” Sakura hurled a punch right at his face. Itachi blocked it with his sword; it caught on Sakura's skin, which now took on the appearance of iron-tough bark. She twisted around with a kick that Itachi caught with the same trick. All the while, the roots darted around from side to side, testing his footing and his flexibility as he had to employ increasingly more acrobatic positions to avoid getting hit. Several times, Sakura—or the roots, or both—fought dirty, aiming for his kidneys, his eyes, his gut, his groin. Once, Sakura landed a hit on his shin, and Itachi knew there'd be a hell of a bruise there tomorrow morning, despite the shin guards.

Itachi needed distance. The way they were fighting now in close quarters favored Sakura's strategy over his own. Even if he somehow managed to get on top of her, she didn't actually need to move her body to use the mokuton—an interesting little tidbit Sakura admitted in one of her letters, although she saw no need to share this detail with the public.

With a particularly vicious fire jutsu, Itachi bought himself twenty meters. He dropped into a crouch when he landed, giving Sakura an assessing look that she returned.

“Nice.” Sakura grinned at him, and Itachi found himself noticing, completely without his permission, what a pretty mouth she had. “Am I making you nervous? When are you going to use those eyes on me? Think I can’t take everything you’ve got?”

Itachi bit his tongue; this Sakura would not be cowed by barbed rhetoric. At best, it’d produce an eye roll; at worst, it’d provoke her irritation. Itachi reached into the pouch strapped to his left hip and pulled out a sheet of paper. A seal might do the trick—for him, not for her. That pollen was a handful of sand for Sakura to throw in his face when he least expected it, and it needed to be brought to heel. Neat lines of characters appeared on the paper as fast as Itachi could write them—*reproduction, stamen, pistil, flower, clear, wind, summer, lungs, breathe*—circling the large, two-character anchor word he’d scrawled at the center of the circle: *pollen*.

He pressed the seal to the back of his neck, and it adhered itself with a pulse of chakra from the Gate of Life. The pollen remained, but when Itachi passed close to it to avoid a root trying to wrap around his ankles, his eyes did not water and swell shut.

Sakura slow clapped; since Itachi had escaped her proximal clutches, she hadn’t moved once. “Well, shit. How’s it feel solving seasonal allergies? You gonna sell those things?”

“The seals require chakra to use.” Itachi blocked a particularly sneaky root with his hand guards. “And some knowledge of how they work. I don’t think they’d find commercial success.”

“Such a shame. Ready to get serious?”

A bead of sweat formed on Sakura’s forehead—with his Sharingan

activated, Itachi could see the individual glints of light where the sun shone through the sphere, and he followed it down, down the side of her face, down her neck, and between her breasts, the tops of which were just barely visible over the cut of her shirt. His stare did not escape his opponent's attention.

“Real subtle,” Sakura drawled. “I’ll take that as a yes. Let’s see how you do with *two* Byakugou. You’re my guinea pig. Try not to die or get maimed or whatever so I can collect some qualitative data.”

She brought her hands together in a seal, and shouted: *Kai*. Black lines poured out of Sakura’s seals, skittering across her skin to form a web of ink. Four years of fuinjutsu boot camp gave Itachi a unique perspective of the process; the lines were, he now understood, actually pieces of the complete seal that gave the Byakugou its form and allowed it to contain chakra—it was a sort of chakra “spout” that allowed energy to flow over the rim depending on how far Sakura tilted the vessel. It was so fascinating that Itachi barely dodged Sakura’s downward heel kick—it connected with the earth below his feet, leaving a massive crater behind. ‘Get serious,’ indeed.

All around them, the roots thickened, pulsing with life, sprouting new growth as the sun touched their bark. Their growth had not quickened, but multiplied, as though the excess chakra powering the mokuton only increased the amount of plant life Sakura could control, not the intensity of a single part. Had Itachi not been concerned with avoiding death, he’d have liked to sit and watch her work—to see what she could coax from the earth after years of listening to nature’s whispers.

Sakura tree-hopped among the branches with graceful ease, leaving Itachi struggling for balance when she interrupted his attempts to stick to the bark. The roots grew up, and up, until the roots became trunks and the new trees formed an impenetrable wall that didn’t even blacken when Itachi sent a fireball hurtling at it. Perched on the highest branches, Sakura observed Itachi’s attempts to control his surroundings with interest, leaving Itachi feeling a bit like a bug in a jar.

The walls began to close in on him before he realized desperate measures were in order. Sheathing his sword, Itachi cupped his hands together and began rotating his chakra, condensing it into the tiny ball that Jiraiya had shown him ages ago. Getting the fire chakra involved was the real challenge; making two clones to handle rotation and fire nature was tedious and wouldn't always be possible. So, Itachi had found a way around it: one hand controlled rotation, the other controlled chakra output (a precarious balancing act on its own)—and a seal on the back of his hand released the fire.

Sakura leapt down from the canopy, bringing the trunks down with her like the point of a spear. Itachi leapt into the air, pushing the Rasengan in front of him. They collided in the middle like stars: a blinding explosion of energy that sent shockwaves rocketing through land and sky. Itachi and Sakura both went flying, Itachi slamming on the ground so hard it knocked the wind out of him, and Sakura hurtling back up to where the canopy had been. Sakura's trees had bent back nearly horizontal from the initial force of the blast, but they were new growth and sprang back just as quickly—quick enough to snap against her backside like a hand towel at the instant her flight reached its climax, putting her on one final, fateful trajectory: right on top of Itachi, her crotch to his face.

Itachi's whole world went out like a candle in the wind. Sakura scrambled off of him with a yelp, and then collapsed onto the grass next to him, shrieking with laughter. Itachi did not move. His entire brain ground to a halt—every thought, every notion, every question ceased in their lofty, higher order functions. All that remained was animal, natural, biological.

“Oh, fuck. Damn.” Sakura wiped tears from her eyes. “Is that—are you —?”

She rose up on her elbows. But before she could stand, Itachi rolled on top of her, pinning her upper arms with both hands. The smile dropped from Sakura's face, but in anticipation, not fear: the

slackening of muscles left her lips barely parted and invitingly supple, and her eyes went soft, tears of laughter sliding down her face, saturating the earth. And the Sharingan, precision instrument as it was, cataloged her expression and told Itachi everything he wanted—needed—to know.

He kissed her. Itachi readied himself for the chakra-laden punch he deserved. But when Sakura wiggled out of his grasp, it was not to push him away, but pull him in: she threw her arms around his neck and pulled him down, pressing her body flush against his, wrapping her thighs around his waist. He couldn't escape. He didn't want to.

Sakura deepened the kiss, one hand sliding up his neck to grab his hair while the nails on the other dug into his back. She moaned in his mouth when he responded in kind—he tasted the salt of her sweat on his tongue, and the bitter tang of the tea she must've drank right before opening her door. He wanted her so much that it scared him. The trees were still up, still forming a barrier between them and the outside world, and he was already hard. He had been for the past five minutes, admittedly—apparently, Itachi's id loved itself a warrior queen. But would it be such a terrible thing if they just...? Right here in the training ground...?

Itachi rose up; Sakura chased him down, mouth still glued to his. But when he tucked his fingers inside the waistband of the shorts beneath her skirt, Sakura pulled her face from his, panting.

“Wait,” she said. “Wait. We should—we should talk about this.”

“Oh. Yes. That—that makes sense.”

“Right. Right, um.” Sakura chewed on her bottom lip. She glanced down, turned red, and wiggled out from under Itachi. A few trees parted, creating a hole through which Sakura scrambled on shaking

legs. She poked her head back through, hiding the rest of her body the way she had at the door.

“Okay, so I’ll—I’ll meet you in the kissing—I’ll meet you in the safehouse in an hour. That room where we found that—the thing. Okay? Okay. Okay. This is fine. Goodbye.”

She ran away too quickly for Itachi to answer. When the last, lingering sounds of her footsteps finally faded away, Itachi collapsed facedown in the grass, counting down the seconds of the longest hour of his life.

Sakura sprinted all the way home and then ran three laps around the family gardens for good measure. One hour, she’d said. One hour to shower, change, scream into pillows, and question absolutely everything she’d ever done in her life to get to this point. There was absolutely no question in her mind what she planned on doing to Itachi in the Kissing House—no doubt whatsoever that she wanted to pin him to the wall and kiss him, suck him off, fuck him silly, and every other nasty little thing she’d been fantasizing about nonstop for over a year.

The only real question left was presentation. Shaved legs? Shaved snatch? Lacy bra? Underwear or no underwear? Should she bring a condom? Would Itachi think less of her if she went to such lengths ahead of time; would he prefer if Sakura pretended at naivety? Probably not. Itachi did not give off the air of someone with prim sexual proclivities—after grinding on his erection while rolling around in the grass, Sakura knew he definitely wasn’t bashful in *that* sort of way. Better to cover as many bases as possible. The condom went into her pocket.

The journey to the Kissing House was one of the strangest Sakura had ever experienced. It felt like everyone was looking at her, and knew

what she was up to. It felt like they were judging her. They were silly thoughts, and Sakura knew on a logical level that it was her own nervousness and shame that made her project scorn onto people she'd never even spoken to. But the feelings remained, and intensified to such a degree that by the time Sakura passed through the main gates of Konoha, she was certain that everyone in the whole world thought her no more than a common slut. And she *was* sort of a slut, admittedly. Decent people didn't let perfect strangers fuck them in triage tents just because the stress got to them. Decent people didn't challenge the apocalypse with baby gravy dripping down their thighs because they forgot to use protection.

Maybe Itachi wouldn't even *want* to fuck her. Maybe he wouldn't even look at her ever again, and if they did manage to save this world, then maybe he'd make up some story about her promiscuity to end the engagement, leaving her a used-up embarrassment of a kunoichi best suited to tasks requiring little in the ways of critical thought.

No, no. That was stupid. And wrong. And mean—not just to her own self, but to Itachi as well, to assume that he'd think of her like that. So what if she fucked him? Screwing your fiancé ranked among the tamer sexual dalliances, to be certain. And if being prepared for the possibility of sex made someone a bad, dirty person, then there ought to have been STIs running rampant not just in Konoha, but Everywhere. But the thoughts were unstoppable and dug into Sakura's mind like overgrown weeds that sprouted twice for every one she pulled up.

The little house had been fully restored and boasted a cheerful coat of paint as well as a reading room manned by the archivist Sakura remembered from the last time she came here. Sakura tumbled down into the hole beneath the trap door, too nervous to perform the inanities of ladder use.

"Excuse me," Sakura said to the guard at the end of the hallway. "Sorry," she said as she brushed past a visitor examining box labels on a long, low shelf. She entered the room with its secret door and slipped inside, reaching for Itachi before she even confirmed he was

there, because of course he would be there waiting for her—she'd asked him to, and why would he ever—

“Do you want me?”

Itachi's voice scraped against the darkness, caught its edges against the thin light streaming from the ceiling. Not ‘this.’ *Me*.

“Yes. Please.”

There was no further discussion. What could they talk about that hadn't already been said in a million other ways? They came together, kissing in the gloom, parting only to toss aside articles of clothing. Sakura still had her skirt on when Itachi put his hand up the hem and touched her; she had no time to feel embarrassed about just how wet she sounded before he had a finger inside of her, and then two, and he didn't complain when she bit down on his shoulder to keep from getting too loud.

The condom in her pocket inspired neither comment nor condemnation; in fact, it happened to be the second condom in the room: one fell out of Itachi's pants when he kicked them off, sending Sakura into a fit of giddy laughter that turned to moans when he ran his tongue across her breasts, down her stomach, and between her legs. Itachi dropped to his knees before her. Now this, Sakura had never done. She'd thought about it, of course, but always figured it wasn't the sort of thing people did often—what about the smell? Was hers bad? Did it taste off? Itachi had her thighs over his shoulder and his mouth to her clit before Sakura could finish the rest of her thought.

With her back pressed against the wall, Sakura dug her fingers into the packed earth to keep her balance; Itachi held most of her weight with only the slightest tremble in his arms, somehow making the

whole scene even hotter. Never in her wildest fantasies had Sakura let Itachi fuck her like this. Much like the scenes she'd daydreamed starring the Other Sasuke, Sakura's fantasy Itachi engaged in acts of sexual intercourse, not Fucking. Slot A, Tab B. There were orgasms in those fantasies, but they were gentle things that rode in like the tide: powerful, but predictable. Something you could set a wristwatch to.

This? *This* was fucking. And speaking of orgasms, Sakura could feel her own coming on. Breaths turned into pants turned into whimpers turned into chanted swears— *fuck-fuck-fuck-fuck-fuck-yes*— and Sakura could not contain the wail when she came, one hand two knuckles deep into the earth, the other pulling Itachi's hair so hard it had to hurt. He stood, gathering her in his arms, holding her to his chest when her legs proved too wobbly to let her stand; the kiss tasted of her—simple, earthy, human—and was as far from tender and delicate as a person could get; these kisses were raw exchanges between animals, full of teeth and claws.

There was no bed in this section of the cavern, not a dresser or table in sight. So Itachi laid her out on the floor. The cool damp of the earth contrasted the oppressive heat of body meeting body, with Sakura caught between. Itachi pulled away for a moment, just long enough to tear open the condom wrapper and put it on—their eyes met, he tipped his head at her, she nodded, and then he was inside her.

It didn't hurt—she'd spent too much time recently with certain objects from certain stores for any of that nonsense—nonetheless, the fullness of sex took her aback. She'd forgotten what it felt like, to be this close to a person. Granted, her previous sexual experience started and ended with one (1) encounter, but she thought that was all there was to sex as a whole: you put a thing in another thing, moved around, everybody came, semen came out, awkward pillow talk happened.

This was nothing of the sort. Itachi's body was all around her, strong and sure in a way that made Sakura feel delightfully small and fragile. She could break every bone in his body with one finger if she wanted, but being in his arms made her feel wonderfully weak, and drove her to tears.

Itachi stopped, but Sakura clung to him to keep him from drawing back.

“What’s wrong? Why are you crying?”

“I’m having feelings. Don’t stop. I want it. It’s a lot.”

“Are you sure?”

She lifted her hips off the floor, wiggled and squeezed around him, and that was as far as the conversation went. His end came much the same as hers—suddenly, peppered with little sighs and kisses that he planted into the side of her neck. Sweat covered them both; Sakura tasted salt again when she pressed her lips against his, reluctant to let him pull out even though she already felt a bit sore.

I love you, she wanted to say. I’m sorry. I love you. I don’t know what to do.

The world might have ended again, crashing down all around them in a riot of pain and blood and death. And nothing in that world or the next could’ve pulled her out of Itachi’s arms, counting his heartbeats and listening to the sound of life all around her—the gnarled roots that sang their ancient songs beneath the soil, deep into the earth where things grew strong in total darkness.

She didn’t let him go until she fell asleep and he roused her, and even then Sakura held his hand all the way back to the Harunos’ estate.

Itachi watched her until she disappeared within her house, taking account of the wrinkles in her clothes that told a story only he knew the whole of. Peace settled in his mind, the lull of thoughts like a warm blanket he'd forgotten the feel of. When was the last time he'd felt like this? Never, probably—in this world and the last, there'd always been something to worry over, avoid, or attack. Now, Itachi felt calm. Judging by the sun's position in the sky, he was overdue for lunch. But it felt almost blasphemous to go about the rest of his day as though it were just like any other, when so many things in his life had changed. Normal was gone forever.

He did not want to go home. Even speaking to another person would break the spell too soon. And so Itachi found the tallest tree in the Forest of Death, sat on the highest branch that could hold his weight, and didn't come down until dinner.

Sakura paced the gardens the minute Itachi left her sight, ducking behind hedges every now and again to avoid a gardener or curious cousin.

So, she'd just fucked Itachi Uchiha. She'd made out with him within a circle of trees, taken a break to pump herself up, crawled into a hole in the ground that had been, at one point, full of dead bodies, and fucked Itachi Uchiha—and *liked* it. Not just physically, either; she felt that fuck in her *soul*. Sakura felt like a room full of cobwebs finally swept out: the window was open, the sun was shining through, and a warm breeze chased away the stale air.

There was just one thing on Sakura's mind: she had to tell someone. She'd just gotten laid, and it was incredible, and she *had* to tell someone. The question was who. Itachi was her closest friend in this world, and he definitely already knew that he'd fucked her, having been the Fucker in question. Tenzo was off-limits; Sakura knew better than to read his prim exterior as prudish, but Tenzo was her teacher, and that was weird. Ino barely knew her in this world. There was

Sasuke, but...yeah, no. Obviously not any of his relatives, either —“Hey Mikoto, your son just fucked my brains out in a hovel. Exceptional dick on that guy: good size, great curve. Nice work!” Yeah, no.

A small child burst out of the rose garden and onto the main path, barrelling right into Sakura’s knees. A flustered mother followed, apologizing extensively for her child’s exuberance. Sakura assured both of them that no harm had been done, and watched them exit the estate hand in hand, the child chirping and bouncing in the way all happy toddlers did. Mother and child wore matching kimono, and even shared the same hairstyle. Out-of-place accessories and sloppy makeup told its own story: one of a child who’d been told to pick out the outfits that day, and a mother who’d lovingly acquiesced.

And Sakura knew, then, exactly who she wanted to tell.

Aristocratic girls from the Land of Fire got disapproving frowns and hissed admonitions when they got laid. Honey Girls got cake— passionfruit cake and guava mochi, to be exact. When Honey went in for fruit-based sexual metaphors, they went all in.

“My little girl, all grown up.” Mebuki watched Sakura dip her hands into the scented water and take the first bites: two traditions, one for shedding childhood and the other for embracing physical hunger in all its forms. “I’m surprised you waited this long.”

“She’s not quite as worldly as you were, my dear.” Satsuko passed Sakura a plate of sliced mango. Those didn’t mean anything. Their purpose was to be delicious. “She reminds me of my sister. She didn’t have sex with anyone until she was twenty-two. One of my aunts never had sex at all. It’s not for everyone.”

“I wish everybody had a party like this after they got some.” Sakura ate the mango. It tasted like summer sun. “It feels nice.”

Mebuki and Satsuko exchanged smiles.

“Speaking of parties,” Satsuko said, placing a hand over Sakura’s wrist. “I think it’s time we discuss that wedding of yours. We’ve had the preparations ready to go for months; all we needed was a sign. And here you are. How does next month sound?”

“Hell yeah. Let’s do it.”

For a nation so fiercely proud of its unique culture and traditions, the Land of Honey was surprisingly amenable to blended celebrations. The meeting of two ethnic groups ought to highlight both in the best possible light, not elevate one over the other: the result was an extravagant affair that began at dawn and culminated at dawn the next day, with time between to rest and sleep. And so Itachi and Sakura were led to the Naka Shrine, Itachi in his haori bearing the uchiwa on its back and Sakura in the long skirts and embroidered jackets of her people.

At the shrine, they partook in a number of rituals: the purification of sins, the sharing of honeycomb, the cups of sake, the taming of bees, the offering of sacred wood to Amaterasu, the planting of a red pine tree. Sakura changed clothing for the reception held in the Aburame butterfly house, into a irouchikake kimono borrowed from Mikoto that had been in the woman’s matrilineal line for over three centuries.

It passed in a blur. The current of tradition, and the force of nature

that was Mebuki's rigid schedule, swept Itachi completely off his feet; he hadn't experienced a single coherent thought since his mother woke him that morning at five AM, scolding him lightly for sleeping in. In Sakura's eyes, he saw the same detached wonder that he felt within his own heart—not a dismal sort of detachment, but the astonishment of a person who'd never in their wildest dreams thought they would experience a happy ending.

Itachi didn't even get a chance to converse with Sakura until everyone took a nap in the early afternoon, eager to escape the heat and sleep off some of the fifteen-course luncheon. Even then, they didn't talk much; Itachi spent his stolen time occupied in what had become his favorite activity: sticking his head up Sakura's skirt and provoking with his tongue a recitation of every swear she'd ever heard. No one mentioned their departure, and their return was met with raised eyebrows on the Uchiha side and, for some reason, miniature passionfruit tarts on the Haruno side.

The party lasted into the night, smoldering like charcoal as friends and family one-by-one retreated to beds and sleeping bags—or for some, the bare ground, since the weather was pleasant. Then, there was one final ritual to complete. This one was done by the couple alone and was the Uchihai's most ancient marriage tradition: a relic from an earlier time, when fire was not merely a source of pride but a necessary means for survival. Just before dawn, Itachi and Sakura crept away from their sleeping well-wishers and made the journey to the Naka Shrine. In the hall where they had placed their offering of wood, they picked up the tinder box and lit two small torches—no chakra, just the slide of flint on pyrite. Mere smoke at first, the fire started as a small glow that began eating away at the wood until it stood on its own, burning bright. There was to be no speaking through this bit of the ritual. They watched, and watched, and said nothing—thinking, wondering, praying, hoping.

Just as the last ember crumbled into ashes, Itachi's vision blurred, and deep within his mind he felt something *click* into place. A rush of warmth blossomed on his face, and then concentrated in his eyes. The Sharingan activated of its own accord, and when Itachi beheld the world around him, it was with perfect clarity. He looked at Sakura.

She looked back. And when she smiled, he knew exactly what she had seen.

“There it is,” she said. “All six dots.”

Afterward, they sat on the edge of a secluded walkway. The exhaustion hit them both at once—but it was a happy sort of tired, and they leaned into one another, content. It didn’t seem real. It shouldn’t have happened. But it did. Somehow, their fates had intertwined, binding them together on some cosmic level that both felt but neither really understood.

“This is weird.” Sakura picked at the hem of Mikoto’s kimono, still a bit shocked that the Uchiha had let her wear it in the first place—they liked Sakura, they really did, but given Sakura’s current abilities, she was covered in grass stains and dirt more often than not.

“I agree. It’s very weird.”

“We had sex a bunch of times and got married.”

“We did do that, yes.”

“Holy shit, man.”

“Yeah.”

“What now?”

Itachi took a deep breath, and let it out in a long sigh. “We still have a lot of work to do,” he said. “Our primary targets still elude us.”

“What if we use our allotted honeymoon time to go bad guy hunting? That would be so funny, wouldn’t it? And kind of a serious idea. Nobody’s going to look twice if we say we want to go be alone somewhere for a month, you know?”

“That...is a good idea, actually. But we need to review our information first before we decide anything.”

“Obviously. Still nothing on Plant Guy?”

“Nothing useful.”

“Wish I could dig him up.” Sakura spread her chakra through the tallgrass lining the pathway, listening to their chatter; it was growing season, and this tree-lined meadow was busy eating and growing. “Like a weed. Just get the plants to fess up where he is and, I dunno, spray him with weedkiller.”

“Then there’s the other target.”

“Your creepy secret admirer. They of the winking smiley faces.”

“I know nothing of their motives and even less of their possible identity.”

“Jiraiya didn’t know anything?”

“No. We didn’t even know where to begin with that one.”

A voice, dry and rough as autumn leaves, floated down from the roof of the shrine: “I might be able to help you, there.”

Itachi and Sakura sprang up at once, dropping into complementary fighting positions; vines exploded out of the ground, finding footholds in the shrine’s outer wall in order to anchor themselves to something solid. But when the voice shifted, and became a figure stepping out from behind the trees, Sakura gasped, and the vines fell. Only the hem of Itachi’s haori kept her from tumbling over in shock.

“Who are you?” Itachi demanded. But he knew. They both knew.

Wearing bandages over his eyes and a ragged oilskin cloak, a tall, dark-haired man advanced into the light of the dawn.

“Hello,” the man said. “I believe you already know who I am.”

Sakura lifted a hand, reaching at nothing. Everything. “You’re—”

“Obito Uchiha,” the man said. Scarred lips pulled wide in a grimace of a smile. “It’s nice to finally meet you in person.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh, my god! The plot is finally happening!

If, like me, your upbringing was fraught with sexual anxiety brought about by culture and/or religion, then you may pretend to have a Honey mom/grandma who will bake you cakes when you get that good-good, as a treat. Heeeeeaaaaaaal.

Do you SEE what I am doing here, this is about so many things and one of the things it is about is taking hold of everything in your life that is arbitrary and saying no actually I get to say what you mean instead of falling into a pit of despair where Nothing Means Anything is bad instead of Nothing Means Anything being an opportunity for you to create your own meaning of things

1. have you taken the time to love yourself today
2. have you taken the time to acquire a wall fucking kink, how is Brazil doing down there, wall fucking kink reader? You are so important to me

He lay in my arms, twisting his head, the day he was dying

Chapter Summary

This chapter has a tree in it

Chapter Notes

Little baby chapter to transition into Oh Fuck It's Go Time final act

This is a rook:



See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The leaves fell, the fires died down, the ink dried, and the dust settled. And Itachi and Sakura—tense, panting, watching each other's backs—considered their prey. Aside from some fancy footwork to avoid injury, Obito hadn't attacked them at all; far from it: he'd given up before anything like a battle could even begin. Itachi's best sealwork and Sakura's angriest plants pinned him down...or, that was what

Obito wanted them to think. If this one was anything like the Obito from back home, he'd need to be watched like a hawk.

"Talk," Sakura spat.

"I've been observing both of you for some time," Obito said, addressing them as one. The atmosphere was still tense, but significantly less so after Obito agreed, quite cheerfully, to let himself be put in a prison seal while encased in spiked honey locust branches up to his neck. "I had my suspicions about who—or what—you were, but I needed time to feel confident in my theory. Now I know."

Itachi wished they'd taken the bandages off of Obito's eyes first; they'd had seconds to act, and he and Sakura both had chosen distance and control. Getting closer was risky, but without seeing what, exactly, there was in Obito's eye sockets, Itachi knew he wasn't getting the answers he desperately wanted. And what he wanted was confirmation. There was no question in his mind that this *was* Obito—one of the infinite ones bumping around the dimensional network, anyway. That aura of his matched the one Itachi had felt at his back the past four years. But was this man this world's Obito? Or someone else's?

"And what is it you think you know?"

Obito turned his head, his eyeless gaze finding Itachi's face. "That you aren't my Itachi. But you are Itachi. You're someone else's, aren't you? You're from another world—like this one, but not the same."

Shit. Itachi subtly altered his stance; even with the precautions, if Obito was capable of knowing such a thing, it wasn't likely their containment measures truly held him down.

Sakura's breath hitched. "You could be anybody, saying anything. If you're so sure that's the truth, then prove it."

"We have little time for mistrust. But I will convince you as best as I can that I mean you no harm. Five years ago, nearly to the day, I traveled from my home to this very forest and waited, as I had been doing for years, hidden at the edge of the meadow. I was waiting for my student, you see. He did not know who I was, only that I had the Sharingan and treated him with kindness. Perhaps he ought to have known better, but I'd been mentoring him since he was five years old, so he trusted me. But on that day, after years of meeting me at the same time and the same place, he did not appear. This was not the first occurrence, but the only one in which there was no message or explanation. One month later, again he did not appear. And again. I sent my rooks looking for him, and they found him ostensibly alive and well. He wore the face and name of my student. But the longer and closer I watched, I could no longer deny the truth. That person was not my student. He was not my brother. He was not my Itachi. He was a foreigner, wearing my Itachi like a costume."

Itachi and Sakura exchanged wordless glances. "How?" Itachi said.

"My jounin instructor, Minato, was a renowned expert in space-time ninjutsu," Obito said. "By the time my Mangekyo Sharingan awakened and I acquired the ability to perform the Kamui, the foundation for my knowledge was strong. Itachi, you know the Kamui, don't you? Speak. There is no time."

"An ability to create pocket dimensions," Itachi confirmed. "The Obito in our world had that power, as well."

"Oh!" Sakura's hands twitched, and the roots followed. "He did that to get away from us a few times. He'd just disappear in the air, like he was going through an invisible door. Is that it?"

Obito nodded. "Not only did I have the ability to open gateways to Kamui's dimension, I could also meditate on the structure of reality itself, and sense abnormalities. Five years and one week ago, I was in the Land of Storms meditating within the Kamui realm. It was during that meditation that I felt the fabric of this world shudder, as though some entity was exerting great force against it. At no point in my life had Kamui ever failed to protect me, but on that day, it did: its walls began to fracture, and through the cracks came roots and branches, growing and spreading so quickly that even my Mangekyo could hardly follow it. They took hold of me, and began to crush my body; I don't know if I was even a target, or if it simply latched onto whatever was there. As I began dying, I turned my Sharingan upon the hole from which the roots descended. And I saw it: another world—one like this one, but not quite the same. A world plagued by a war that another me had helped set into motion, all for the sake of resurrecting an ancient monster: Kaguya."

"Kaguya," Sakura whispered. "You saw her?"

"I believe I did. At the time, I didn't know what any of it meant. I didn't even know if it was real, or if it was a hallucination of a dying man. Regardless, I used every bit of my power to end my connection with Kamui and return to my world. I awoke near a forest clearing containing a tent owned by a well-known merchant from the Land of Honey: one Satsuko Haruno. Inside that tent, the Uchiha and Haruno families were engaged in business negotiations—the business of engagement. Yours."

Itachi's heart pounded. "You're the one who's been sending those messages. All this time, it was you."

"I am. I have helped you in many ways since your arrival to this world, though I have not been able to help you nearly as much as I wanted to. I'm sorry." Obito looked down. "I know this must be incredibly bizarre for you. I know the two of you so well, and you know me not at all. If there had been more time to tell you all of this...it doesn't matter now. I couldn't."

The spiked branches shivered when Sakura's hands curled into fists. "Why did you wait until now to show up in person? What's your stake in any of this beyond curiosity? You work for *him*. Zetsu."

Obito shifted position, and the branches fell from his body to the ground; he ground his heel into the seal Itachi had placed beneath him, severing the careful lines Itachi had intended to ensnare him—cleanly, no brute force. A master's work.

"Everything is connected, Sakura. Everything. Our worlds are so close together they nearly touch. You know better than any of us, how living things can form bonds over vast stretches of space. The mokuton itself is proof of that."

With slow, careful hands, Obito opened the front of his cloak, and unbuttoned the shirt beneath. There, on his skin, was a seal: *the* seal—the one that had marked Orochimaru and Kandachi—and it bore sections of that curious, ancient text that Itachi remembered from the consuming seal Zetsu had used to trap him in the old Uchiha safehouse.

"After an accident during the Third War when I was presumed dead, I awoke in the cave with Madara and the two entities called Zetsu. There, I learned that they intended to use me as a tool to destroy their enemies. I refused. Konoha had been kind to me, as had my adopted parents. Even the knowledge of Rin's death did not convince me to ally with them. And so the one called Black Zetsu took my eyes and bound my life to his with this seal. So long as this seal remains active, I cannot act in ways that harm him or interfere with his master plan—directly."

Itachi and Sakura exchanged confused looks. "Then how were you able to help us? If you know why Itachi and I were sent here..."

“I cannot interfere directly, I said. As you know, Itachi, intent is everything when it comes to seals. I convinced myself that saving your lives did not inherently constitute helping him. So long as I believed that, I remained unharmed. But now I must throw caution to the wind; I received a report from my rooks not long ago that Jiraiya the Toad Sage was seen traveling to the Genjutsu Tree Village.” Without warning, Obito inhaled sharply, one hand going to the seal on his chest, which had begun to glow.

“It’s fine,” he insisted when Sakura stepped forward, hands glowing. “I’m still too useful to kill. It will hurt me, but he won’t kill me. Yet.”

Itachi spoke. “What was Jiraiya doing at the village?”

“White Zetsu. His den is there.” Obito cut himself off again, panting. “There’s a cavern under the village where an underground river used to run. The roots of the genjutsu trees feed into it, and provide the life energy to produce his minions.” Sweat formed on Obito’s brow. “Jiraiya uncovered the den. But he doesn’t know the rest. There’s more. The...the other one...shit, it’s trying to keep me from speaking.”

“What is it?”

“The roots. Sakura—you have to follow the roots. They were the start of everything, and they’ll help you end it. For good. For your world, and this one, too. You can do it. You can win this. I believe you can—I *must* believe you can. This world is connected to so many others. If you succeed here, perhaps your actions will save those other worlds, all those between yours and mine, and beyond. If my Itachi is out there somewhere, lost...I have to believe something can be done to save him.” He reached into his pocket and withdrew a single, fan-shaped leaf that he threw in Sakura’s direction. She picked it up with a puzzled look.

Obito sank to the ground. Itachi tried to help him up, but Obito pushed him away. “Don’t just *stand* there,” he snapped. “There isn’t much time. Go.”

“What about you?”

“I can’t help you any more than this, I’m afraid. The seal won’t allow it. I barely got here as it is. Go.” Obito slammed one hand against the ground; a summoning seal flashed across the grass, and when the light faded, a large rook stood before them. “Take me back,” Obito told the rook. “You know what to do.”

The rook took to the air, flying up and up until she nearly disappeared into the clouds; then she folded her wings into a stoop, diving right for Obito at high speed. Obito held out his hand; the rook collided with it, and with a *crack* like thunder and a flurry of feathers, man and bird both disappeared.

“Shit,” Sakura said, stuffing the leaf in her pocket. “The village is...” She counted on her fingers. “What, like a day away if we move fast?”

Itachi, still finding his mental footing after the shock of the past ten minutes, took Sakura by the arm when she coiled up in preparation to run.

“No,” he said. “One of us needs to inform the Hokage. You should alert Tenzo, too. It sounds like Black Zetsu was seen in the area as well as the white one. If that’s true, we’re going to need all hands on deck. I’ve been working with Jiraiya and know his methods best; I’ll go now, you bring the others. If Obito believes that your mokuton is the key to this world’s survival, then your life is far more valuable than mine. Let me go first.”

Sakura swore, and kicked a rotting branch decaying in the grass; it exploded into a cloud of splinters. “I completely disagree with you on the valuing my life over yours thing, but...yeah, you’re right. This is too big for both of us. Don’t get comfortable, though. I can still kick ass just as good as you.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“I’ll be right behind you. I’m probably going to change into something else, while I’m at it; if the world doesn’t end and I fuck up this kimono, I think your mom will kill me.”

“Probably.”

Sakura offered him a high five, which he accepted with affectionate bewilderment. “Have fun duking it out in Uchiha black tie. Don’t die. Save at least one bad guy for me.”

“I will.” Itachi’s heart sang like a bird. Sakura was perfect, he thought—for him, for the world, for loving and protecting.

“Love you. I think. Probably. Now you have to live so you can say you love me too. Bye.” She was gone in a flurry of petals before Itachi could do much more than choke on his own spit.

“I don’t think she meant it,” Itachi told Kosuke and Echo after they heeded his call. “It’s just stress.”

Kosuke and Echo looked at one another, exchanging inhuman

expressions of exasperation. Echo let out a throaty, teasing crow-laugh.

“Sure,” Kosuke said. They hunched down, offering up their back to Itachi. He climbed on, Echo clinging to his haori, and then they were off to the north in a flash of green and red.



This is a strange entry, which is why I've saved it for last. The drawings depict a weird ginkgo tree, I think. The fan-shaped leaves with radiating, non-networked veins are a dead giveaway, so if it isn't a ginkgo it's a close relative. Considering ginkgos are the oldest type of tree alive, that would be a huge scientific discovery, or rediscovery. But the text says it's something

called a god tree. Also different: the accompanying description follows a narrative style rather than scientific format, and there is no discussion of the plant's medicinal uses. It also appears much, much older than the rest of the book; the pages in question were sewn into the binding separately, and the language used is so archaic it's practically foreign. After working with the Uchiha archivists, I managed to translate the text from medieval to modern. It looks like the entry is incomplete. This may be a page from another text, or it could be that the rest of the story was lost to time. Nearly half of the text relies on figurative literary devices to convey meaning, so what I've written here is a loose translation, not a word-to-word transcription!

????

God tree

It is cunning, the god [?] tree; the land surrounding its offshoots is always lush and fertile, and in this way it attracts its human prey. Once a community of humans settles near the offshoots, the roots seek them out, stealing their life force and sickening them; given enough time, all will become empty shells—strange, pale creatures that serve the tree and its mother. The first of these pale creatures was one of our own: the patriarch [unintelligible], whose acquisition of the Rinnegan tormented him with visions of the moon and the god tree. He became a madman, laughing and crying at the moon, clawing against the doors of the room we held him in.

[unintelligible]

We found more offshoots of the god tree in the valley where the river forks. There we destroyed as many as we could, though our wayward cousins the Senju drove us away before we could complete our work. It would seem that the threat of desiccation does not deter them from seeking the tree's power.

[unintelligible]

Indra was wise to burn. When his father Hagoromo sent him on a mission to save a dying village in [The Land of Storms], Indra saw that the offshoots from the god tree had infested the land. He killed the offshoots as quickly as possible, burning them all the way down to the roots, and the villagers recovered. And yet his father Hagoromo scorned Indra's methods, and favored his son Asura, who had been sent to another village suffering the same plague. Asura wasted a year convincing the villagers to destroy the trees of their own accord, because the villagers had been seduced by its power and did not want to kill the thing that had made their land so beautiful. During that year, scores of villagers died or were turned into pale creatures as the tree stole their life away. Why does it matter that Indra used his Sharingan to compel the villagers to destroy the parasite killing them? Asura was powerful, but not wise. Waiting kills.

[unintelligible]

When our scouts discovered a new offshoot in a forest in [The Land of Fire], they found the Senju settled around it. The tree fed Asura's descendants at first, and gave the mightiest among them the power to control plants. But the arrangement did not last forever, and eventually the tree began to feed upon its retainers. Some of the Senju fled and formed scattered bands elsewhere. The most militant remained and fought back. After five years of warfare, we broke through their defenses and burned the tree down to the roots. The Senju mourned its loss, and all those dying on the battlefield became like trees and moved no more. It is a cursed place.

[unintelligible]

Rumors persist that some Senju make training pilgrimages to [the place in The Land of Fire] where we felled the offshoot of the god tree. We sent spies into Senju territory, who brought back tales of Senju shinobi meditating on the old battlefield, praying that the god tree would bless them with its power once more. But it is dead, for we have killed it, and it will bear no more fruit. We remain watchful.

[unintelligible]

We were wrong. May Amaterasu and her black flame preserve us.

It lives.

Chapter End Notes

1. are you ready it's fucking go time

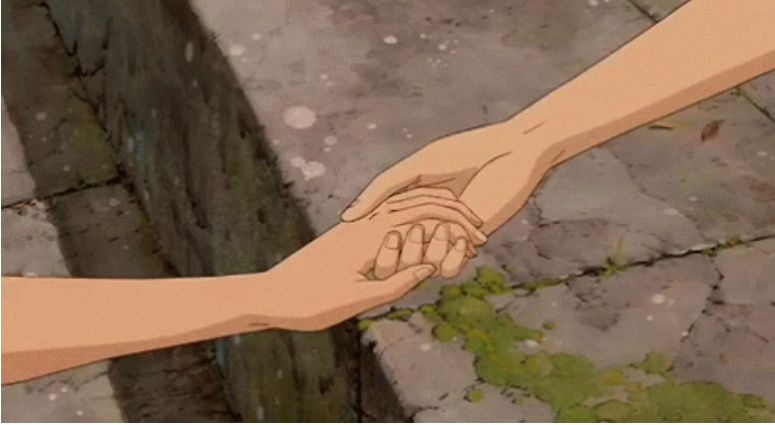


I walked him out to see the trees and the sky

Chapter Summary

In this chapter oh shit oh fuck oh shit oh fuck

Chapter Notes



See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Fast was not fast enough. The forest tumbled around Sakura and Tenzo, sending them forward like a stone from a slingshot. Today, the plants favored them and willingly acquiesced to the mokuton's suggestions that they help two humans move faster than the wind. They whispered ahead, sending messages crackling through the fungal, rooted network underground. The trees beyond the horizon were ready and waiting.

"Shit, shit, shit," Sakura chanted under her breath. "Is this even the right way?"

"Listen," Tenzo said. "Don't get in your head. Listen to the trees. Let them tell you where to go."

There, there, the trees said. A cave beneath the earth. Roots of the ancestor, stealing her children with blood and bone.

Hurry, that ancient voice rumbled. It was separate from the rest of the forest, but used their networks to communicate, for Sakura heard it reverberating in every trunk, every branch, every leaf. *It is not too late.*

Itachi clung to Kosuke's back, counting second by agonizing second as toad, man, and crow sped through the countryside. Gradually, the Land of Fire's mixed forests and grassland gave way to wetland as they crossed the border into the Land of Swamps. Itachi retrieved the pepper oil from his pouch, offering some to Kosuke and Echo after applying the concoction to his upper lip.

The Genjutsu Tree Village. Of *course* it was the Genjutsu Tree Village. Jiraiya and Itachi had scoured the area after turning in Kandachi's body, but the place had appeared abandoned. No amount of searching had led them to any sort of cavern below ground. Its secrecy had been well guarded; it was very probable the villagers themselves had no real idea what lay beneath their homes.

Right on cue, a white, humanoid figure burst out of the swamp's murky water, reaching for Kosuke's leg; they sidestepped with ease and jumped a safe distance away as the figure stumbled back into the water. It stood, slowly, rising up out of the gloom, and Itachi got his first good look at it: a white Zetsu clone. But not quite. This one appeared partially human, and as it straightened to its full height, Itachi caught a glimpse of tattered fabric clinging to the clone's arm: a shred of purple kimono. The same kimono that the girl from the festival had been wearing when Itachi and Jiraiya first infiltrated the village.

There was no time for sentimentality: with an inhuman shriek, the clone coiled its body like a spring and shot forward, attacking Itachi head on. Other wails answered from within the trees, and other white figures appeared—the rest of the village. Most were civilians with bits and pieces of their old life warring with their new forms, but Itachi caught a partially decayed headband here and there, or scraps from flak jackets. When he and Jiraiya had traveled to the village to fight Kandachi, it'd already been emptied of inhabitants. Now he knew what had become of them.

Misshapen as they were, the clones did not put up much, if any fight. Even the ones that slipped past Itachi's sword and Kosuke's tongue did little more than slam their bodies against the toad's tough outer skin. Within ten minutes, all had fallen to pieces, still shrieking; a combination fire and oil attack silenced their voices forever. Itachi made note of the location—perhaps, in the future, there might be time for a proper burial—and ordered Kosuke to press on.

The village, when they arrived, was in a sorry state. Between the moisture and the oppressive summer heat, nature had already begun decomposing the remnants of what had once been a settlement; roofs had caved in, mold grew everywhere, and the whole area smelled of saturated wood. Towards the center of the village, Itach uncovered signs of a battle; here, whole houses had been leveled, wooden fences knocked down, market stalls burnt by fire. White hair and puddles of oil told the rest of the story.

Itachi's Sharingan combed the area; he saw the damage, but not the ones who'd caused it. "I can't see anything. Do you hear anything, Kosuke?"

"Rumbles beneath the earth," Kosuke said. "Someone is fighting below us."

"But where's the entrance?"

Echo fluttered her wings, cawing up a storm. She perched on top of the building in the very center of town: an administrative office presumably meant to house the local seat of government. The mess outside the building spilled indoors; loose paper, chairs, and office supplies lay strewn across the floor and whole sections of wall had been blasted apart. But there was not, Itachi noted with uncharacteristic optimism, any blood. He followed the trail of debris as quickly as he dared; it led to a bathroom lacking a floor, owing to the massive hole there. Holding a hand over the opening, Itachi felt a cool breeze, and right at the edge of his senses he heard a commotion that sounded quite like the thud of a thousand white-haired needles finding their target.

“No,” Itachi said when Echo landed on his head. “Sakura and Tenzo are on their way. Fly back to Konoha. Find the Hokage and tell him where we are. We’ll need medics.”

Echo bobbed her head, and then flew off. Itachi stared down into the darkness, and jumped.

Beneath the earth, the darkness encompassed everything. There was no light here, artificial or natural, because there was no need for it. White Zetsu and Black Zetsu both possessed senses that easily bypassed the need for sight: they moved within the earth itself, feeling their way by vibration and taste and sound. This was their domain: the deep, dark holes of the world full of roots and packed earth.

Jiraiya had no such abilities; Itachi, his Sharingan tested to its limits, found the flickering light within the cavern and followed it: more puddles of burning oil and hastily formed seals that let off an eerie, green glow. And there was Jiraiya himself, standing in the middle of a large chamber lined with waterfalls and permeated by enormous, gnarled roots. White Zetsu clones completely surrounded him; for every mutilated white body there were three whole ones, packed so tightly in their circle that if they’d needed to breathe, they probably couldn’t have. At present, fifteen white Zetsu clones had broken from

the circle, and were attacking Jiraiya directly. Above, Black Zetsu, half-in half-out of the bedrock, observed the battle below.

“Keep coming.” Black Zetsu’s voice rattled like a dying man’s. “It will tire. And that one—” Zetsu turned his eerie yellow eye on Itachi; it glowed in the darkness. “Is an inconvenience. Take care of it.”

“The hell you doin’ here, kid?” Jiraiya whipped his hair around, sending all fifteen of his attackers flying into the stone walls. They splattered against it like bugs.

“Saving you.” Itachi summoned his sword, and absentmindedly decapitated ten clones lurching in his direction. He burned five more to a crisp with a fireball, briefly illuminating the entire cavern in sharp relief.

“Didn’t need saving, hot stuff. Tryin’ to do my job here.” Jiraiya punched the ground beneath his feet; bits of earth rose into the air, and he kicked them into the crowd, soaked in oil and set alight.

Kosuke’s tongue wrapped around the closest clone; they used it as a blunt weapon, crushing a whole section of the circle with one precise swing. Itachi followed the beating with another fireball. A hole opened up, and Itachi passed through, coming to a stop with his back to Jiraiya’s.

“You just want all the credit, sensei.”

Jiraiya nicked his thumb, summoning two more toads that worked alongside Kosuke and wreaked havoc on the perimeter. “Nobody ever got famous being part of a group.”

“That is...blatantly and ridiculously untrue. The Sannin famously counts you as a member. Three.”

Jiraiya clucked his tongue. “No adverbs my ass.”

“I didn’t say they’re *bad* words. They just need to be used—” Itachi thrust his sword between Jiraiya’s ankles, spearing a clone through the eye. “Deliberately.”

The white clones kept coming, rendering the battle hypnotic; all the clones attacked the same way, moved the same way, fainted the same way. There was no personality, save for the few who’d been turned to clones recently and still bore traces of their human lives. It would be easy to die here, even though the skill of their attackers was laughable. Itachi and Jiraiya would tire. The clones wouldn’t. The ones who hadn’t been burnt to a crisp still flailed about on the floor: naked limbs grasping and dragging themselves, mouths wailing, eyes blinking furiously.

It was the predictability that did Itachi in, precisely two seconds after he realized he’d gotten too comfortable. That was the thing about the Sharingan—it didn’t scry. It looked for patterns and finished the puzzle based on expected results. Most living creatures fell right into that trap. Muscle and bone only moved in so many ways. If a person flexed like *this*, then their punch would move like *that*. The Sharingan relied on the predictability of biology and physics to do the heavy lifting.

But White Zetsu was not of muscle and bone. The strange, unearthly substance that formed its body, and its clones’ bodies, resisted the Sharingan’s careful calculations. Itachi saw White Zetsu coming. He knew that this one was the original, not a clone—its face was too controlled, its eyes too intelligent. But when the Sun Sword swung in an arc and severed the white arm from its host, sending the appendage flying over Itachi’s head, it did not fall to the ground as an arm ought to’ve: it twisted, distorted, and sent out a tendril of sticky,

white material that reconnected with the original body, wrapping around Itachi's frame like a rope. He was stuck.

Several things happened all at once. Black Zetsu emerged fully from the ceiling and shot towards Itachi like a lance. White Zetsu sank his teeth into Itachi's sword arm, sending the weapon clattering to the ground. Kosuke and the other toads finished off the last of the clones. And Jiraiya moved like a blur, reaching Itachi fractions of a second before Black Zetsu did, holding Itachi by the shoulders and protecting him from the frontal attack.

Black Zetsu's arm, made lethal by weeping thorns, tore through Jiraiya's torso, the tips of the fingers coming through the other side. Jiraiya slammed an elbow in Black Zetsu's face, but before it even connected, the creature was gone—vanished into the earth, his arm carelessly torn from Jiraiya's body, inflicting even more damage on the way out.

“Aww, fuck,” Jiraiya said. “Yeah, that one might do me in.” He went down on one knee, then both, and then fell prone on the floor.

Sakura always pushed, and pushed, and pulled at the forces of nature—seeking to tame nature, to lasso it. Her intentions were better, she'd always thought, because unlike nature, Sakura was a thinking, feeling being. Logic, emotion, and ethics drove her forward. What did nature know except to make more of itself and resist change?

But perhaps it was her that resisted change. Wanting to get her own way stymied change, not facilitated it. Sakura jumped from the ground to the trees, taking advantage of the increased footholds as the forests gave way to the more crowded swamps. She reached into the trees, finding their life force, touching it, but not yanking it out to do her bidding. She listened.

There, there, there. A cavern.

The trees knew better than to stay the same. Failure to adapt was failure to thrive and, ultimately, death.

“Where is the cave?” Sakura asked aloud.

“What?” Tenzo said.

Here, here. Taking from living things. Killing them. Turning them. Deep, deep, where no one sees but us. Fire. Growing. Taking.

She followed the trees’ network, letting the current of life guide her from plant to plant until she sensed the genjutsu trees. Last time, neither her nor Tenzo had been able to determine a central source for all that power. Today, she still couldn’t. But she felt something else. There was an energy sink in the area that was sapping up every bit of chakra the genjutsu trees had. It was hungry.

Hurry, the voice said. You aren’t too late to help me. Ask the roots to open the way....

“Almost there,” Sakura told Tenzo. “The roots will tell us where to find them.”

Black Zetsu sank down into the earth, his chakra fading away before

Itachi had time to blink, much less go after him. There were more important tasks at hand: even as Jiraiya lay bleeding on the floor, White Zetsu and his legions remained. Kosuke and the other toads intervened, chipping away at the clones until only a handful were left, though bits of white limbs and heads on the floor still went about the facsimile of life: grasping, howling, straining.

“The real one...” Jiraiya coughed up a mouthful of blood.

Itachi’s heart raced, his mind warring between logic and emotion. The real White Zetsu was still there, now perched atop one of the larger roots, watching them. He needed to be killed, or at the very least subdued. The most logical course of action would be to abandon Jiraiya, now useless in battle, and address the enemy head-on.

“Take him out.” Jiraiya’s words left his mouth wet and thin. “Get that fucker. Don’t worry about me. Don’t stay.”

But Itachi wanted, more than anything, to stay.

Kosuke forced White Zetsu from his arboreal throne with a deadly snap of powerful jaws; the creature went airborne, sending clouds of spores into the air as he jumped to the ground and went on the attack once more. Itachi did not think: he moved. The Sun Sword flashed through the air, the low light of dying fires and flickering seals catching on the metal. It gleamed in the dark. White Zetsu dodged the blow. Tried to, at least. With his eyes focused on the sword, he missed the entrapment seal Itachi threw upon the rocks beneath his feet. It was not an elegant construction, still partially blank for use as a template but the fraction of a second it bought Itachi was enough. The sword went through White Zetsu’s neck like a kitchen knife cutting into a ripe peach: near effortlessly, the sharpened edge catching on nothing, not even bone.

White Zetsu's head fell to the floor. The body followed. Itachi removed his tanto from the sheath on his leg; with it, he pinned the rolling countenance to the cave floor, putting the blade through the top of the skull. The remaining clones twitched, convulsed, and then went through the motions of decay, becoming little more than fragments of plant matter. The glow from the eerie yellow eyes flickered and began to fade.

And then there was nothing, save for the ringing in Itachi's ears and the sound of a dying man gasping for air. Itachi kneeled down, his hands finding the ragged edges of Jiraiya's clothing, torn to shreds as much as the body underneath it. Frantic with stress and premeditated grief, Itachi went through the catalog of trauma protocols Sasuke had pressed him to learn in one of his letters. There was blood: how much? A tourniquet wouldn't work on an impalement, would it? Ought he to stuff the entry and exit wounds?

"Not coming back from this one, kid," Jiraiya said.

"You don't know that," Itachi bit out. His Sharingan spun in the darkness, useless save for the way it highlighted every grisly detail of the scene before him. "Sakura will be here soon. Don't move."

There were seals in his pack, simple ones for staunching blood. Itachi slapped one of them on Jiraiya's forehead, and breathed a sigh of relief when the wounds stopped bleeding. He'd forgotten how hot blood was at the moment it left the human body. Anything transferred in battle became lukewarm in its journey through the air from person to person, but the liquid pooling on Jiraiya's chest burned, burned, burned, hot with life.

"Won't do much. Damage is done."

"Shut up. I'm working on it." Itachi's hands were shaking. He pawed

through his bag, knowing that the kind of sealing power he needed to fix what had been broken existed only in hospitals, or perhaps not at all. There was no such thing as a miracle cure, Sasuke told him. There was Sakura, though. Sakura was a miracle cure. But she wasn't here. "What's happening to you? Is it just blood loss, or is there something else?"

"Hmm." Jiraiya was remarkably calm for a man lying in a pool of his own blood. Save for the sights and sounds of his broken body, he might have been pondering the question at a cafe on a nice, sunny day. "Poison. Of a sort."

"Poison?"

"My chakra pathways feel like they're...I dunno, withering. Can't seem to manipulate what's left." Jiraiya held up his own hand, examined it. "Weird. They're fragile. What can you see?"

"With the Sharingan?"

"No, with your asshole." Another cough. Another mouthful of blood on the rocks. "Yes, with your Sharingan."

"I see—" Chakra pathways withering. Breaking. Dissolving. Chakra rushing to undamaged pathways only to fizzle out. "Your whole chakra system is dying."

"Damn. Well, maybe it's for the best. Dunno if I could live out the rest of my life without being able to walk on water. What is life if one cannot take shortcuts over ponds?"

“Shut *up*. Is this really the time for jokes?” Itachi’s nose stung—his eyes, too. Crying wouldn’t solve anything. It wouldn’t neutralize the poison. It wouldn’t close a wound. All it did was claw open what wanted to heal.

“Hey.” Jiraiya moved his hand to Itachi’s face, catching tears between his fingers. “If this is it for me, can you do an old man a solid?”

“You’re not dying.” Itachi wiped his nose on his sleeve. Kosuke crawled to his side, and he leaned his head against their rough, warm skin. “What do you want?”

“Answers. I was assigned to investigate you and your girl after your engagement, when someone tipped off the Hokage about a sudden change in personality and behavior. Kind of a red flag factory, if I’m being honest. So if you have a boss somewhere you report to, maybe suggest they sign you up for some extracurricular subtlety classes.”

Itachi’s heart beat like the footsteps of a fleeing animal—dead end—dead end—another dead end. “Fuck.”

“Yeah.” More coughing, more blood. Coagulated, this time. Was that good? “There were other things, too. Once we skipped town, I’d test you here and there. Little stuff at first: things you probably wouldn’t know, but could if you were somebody else. Then...big stuff. I infiltrated Ame on one of my solo trips, and found out about Nagato. And when I name dropped him...you didn’t ask who he was. You knew exactly who I was talking about, didn’t you?”

“Shit.”

“Hidan’s ritual. The things you said about Deidara. Little stuff, but it added up. So tell me...who are you—really?”

Itachi was not surprised. Just tired. So very, very tired. “Someone else.”

“Another person?”

“Another Itachi. I’m from another...another world like this one. I was sent here. Sakura, too.”

“Oh. Wow.” Jiraiya rested his head back on the rocks and stared at the cave ceiling for a while. “Yeah, okay, I didn’t see *that* coming. Thought the Great Toad Sage was being metaphorical.”

“I...who?”

“My money was on you being some sort of, like, foreign sleeper agent, or a victim of body switching kind of bullshit. ‘Dimension hopper’ was not on my list. You’re really, actually from another world? Damn it, I owe Minato so much money. Thought he was talking out his ass about all that crap. That shit’s for real?”

“More or less. When we arrived here, we were put into younger versions of ourselves.”

“Same body, different you. Sakura, too?”

“Yes.”

Itachi had always imagined this conversation would involve someone tying him to a chair and torturing him for information. Not this. Never this. But the more he spoke, the more he relaxed. The confession did not tear at his heart the way he thought it would. Instead, he felt a profound peace.

“Tell me about it,” Jiraiya asked him. “The world you come from.”

Itachi watched the color of Jiraiya’s skin pale, and marked the way the old man’s chest labored to keep his voice steady. Death was coming, but politely. There was time.

“It’s...a lot like this one, actually,” Itachi began. “Some things are different. I’m a few years older than Sakura there. The Fourth Hokage and his wife Kushina died fighting the Fox, which was sealed into Naruto. Tsunade became Hokage. My clan...isn't there anymore. Just me and Sasuke.”

“Interesting.” Jiraiya’s brow furrowed. Despite the blood loss, it didn’t seem as though his mind had slowed down one bit. “Why are *you* here?”

“I have a job to do,” Itachi said simply. “We both do. The world we came from is dead. And the same thing will happen in this one... unless we save it.”

Jiraiya tried to chuckle. It turned into a cough halfway through. “Seems like they picked the right people. I can imagine no better world-savers than the most emotionally unhinged power couple of your generation. Are you going to hold the problem while she punches it?”

Itachi shook his head, clenching his jaw in a failed attempt to chase

more tears away. “She could do it. She could. It was a mistake to send me here. I’m not the right person to do...anything.”

“Do you love her?”

Yes. “I think so.” Yes. “Probably.” Definitely.

Jiraiya glared up at his wayward student. “I’m dying, Uchiha. Literally, actually dying. And you’re sitting there fucking lying to me.”

“Fine. Yes. I love her.”

“Good,” Jiraiya said. “She’s lucky to have you with her.”

Itachi scoffed. “No, she isn’t. She’d have been just fine on her own, or with someone else. Some people don’t deserve second chances.”

“That doesn’t sound like the Itachi I know.”

“You *don’t* know me.” Itachi ground his teeth, tried biting down the pain welling up in his chest, and failed. “I did horrible things in my old life. I murdered my clan.” Itachi looked away. It was a weak thing to do, but he didn’t want to see Jiraiya’s expression. “I *tortured* my brother. I thought I knew everything, and that I was the only person in the world who could keep the worst from coming to pass. I allied myself with a monster, to that end. And then I became one. Because I thought I could save one person, and through him my country and the rest of the world. I’m hardly qualified to put an entire planet’s life in my hands.”

“You know what?” Jiraiya rested his hand on Itachi’s chest. The hand, with its skin that should not have been so paper-thin, was cold and getting colder. “Years ago, when the toads sent me to Mount Miyoboku to learn their fighting arts, the Great Toad Sage asked to see me. He said he had a prophecy, and that I needed to hear it.”

Itachi pulled away. Jiraiya took a bloody handful of Itachi’s kimono and yanked him back down.

“You’re not running from this. *Listen*. He said that one day I’d have a student from another world who wielded the power to save or destroy ours, and that it would be my actions that will determine which path this student takes. Granted, I thought ‘another world’ was entirely figurative, because I thought I lived in reality and not in some low-budget science fiction short.”

“Then it’s as he said. I’ll destroy the world. And Sakura will pick up the pieces.”

“*Goddamn*, that is such—”

Itachi’s calm facade shattered, and he turned his burning eyes to Jiraiya’s face. “It’s the truth,” he snapped. “I’m a *bad person*. And there’s no amount of picking villagers’ belongings out of mudslides that will change that. I slaughtered people. I tried to kill the other *you* on numerous occasions. I wrote whole chapters of my brother’s life without his knowledge or consent and expected him to follow my lead like he was some sort of avatar for my ambitions. Sakura hated me, and she should *still* hate me. Everyone who came into contact with me was worse off for it. There’s nothing left of me that deserves redemption, and I certainly do not deserve love.”

“Nobody *deserves* love, kid.” Jiraiya was angry. Angrier than Itachi had ever seen him before. “You don’t earn it. It’s just something that

happens. You start making a list of qualifications for who's allowed to be loved and you get a blank list of recipients."

"I don't matter in the grand scheme of things."

"Come on. You matter."

Itachi shook his head like a beast of the field swinging its horns in a protective arc: *no, no, don't come near*. "Only as long as I'm useful to the cause."

"No. *You* matter." When Itachi still didn't budge, Jiraiya actually growled at him. "Look, I don't care who or what you 'really' are. Whatever your old life was, I had nothing to do with that. All I know is the Itachi you became. And I like that guy, all right? I don't care about him because of what he can do for me. I care about him for his own sake. Because I had the best four years of my life running around with him. Because he could keep up with me. Because he listened, and learned, and wanted to do the right thing."

"It's not enough."

"Hell it's not."

"It was supposed to be someone else."

"Oh, you are so full of shit. I love you, asshole." Jiraiya said it so matter-of-factly. Like it took no effort. Like his love was not directed at a monster. "You hear me? I've got fatherly feelings and shit for you that I thought I'd never feel again after Nagato. You changed me for the better. I don't give a flying fuck what terrible things you did. You

think I don't have skeletons in my closet? That was then. This is now. I don't know if you need permission, because you shouldn't, but you're allowed to move on. There's nothing you can do to change the past. Focus on what happens next."

"I can't."

"You can."

"I don't know how."

"Then fucking *try*."

Sakura held both hands over her mouth, hoping the pressure combined with her willpower would keep her from throwing up wedding food all over the cave floor.

This was it, then: the beginning of the end of everything.

Itachi had said everything, and now there was no going back. No more secrets. No more lies. Sakura knew that their identities wouldn't be safe forever. But she'd imagined the enigma of her existence in hibernation—something someone would awaken later, years after she'd died, after poking through scraps of her journals, or a letter from Itachi she forgot to burn. She had not imagined this: Itachi crying in a pool of Jiraiya's blood, shedding light on the darkness that had always surrounded them. She had not imagined collapsing to the ground, trying not to hyperventilate while Tenzo looked down at her, ashen faced, asking her if it was true. There had never been a present quite like this. But it had happened, all the same.

Itachi turned his head, regarding Sakura and Tenzo with a nod, nothing more. Regret did not settle in his face; weariness was there—always had been—but he was not startled or upset by their sudden presence, by the interruption of the ritual sacrifice at hand. He simply stood up, and picked Sakura up off the floor. He held her face to his chest until her lungs stopped heaving, and the threat of panic attack was over.

“Sakura—”

“No. Wait.” Sakura pushed Itachi away, not in anger or fear, but necessity. “I need to see to Jiraiya.”

Tenzo sat down, and put his face in his hands. Standing at Tenzo’s side, Itachi let the man be. There was no telling what he thought of all this, but Itachi didn’t know the words that might comfort the man. He didn’t know how to tell him that Sakura loved him deeply, and that whatever horrible things Tenzo was imagining, Sakura’s lack of caring was not one of them.

“Nice of you to join the party,” Jiraiya mumbled. He did not flinch when Sakura’s chakra forced its way into his body, as much as it had to sting. Normally, mystical palm employed a gradual insertion of energy that allowed the patient’s body to accommodate the intrusion. There was no time for that sort of care here. “The black one got me.”

“Your chakra pathways are completely destroyed.” A note of wonder crept into Sakura’s tone. “It feels like...like someone used the mokuton to plant foreign chakra inside of you. There’s something invading your pathways that won’t let them heal. Like a parasitic weed. The whole system is collapsing.”

“Sounds like curtains for me.”

“Well...” Sakura glanced at the bloodloss seal on Jiraiya’s forehead. “I can heal enough of the physical trauma to stabilize you for transport, but I can’t say with confidence that you’ll recover. Whatever Zetsu put in you is ingraining itself within your chakra system. I can slow it down quite a bit, but given the type of damage it’s already done, it’ll most likely kill you. Not now, but eventually.”

“Your bedside manner is atrocious.”

“I know a cut-the-bullshit type when I see one.”

“That’s fair. How long do I have?”

Sakura blew a strand of hair out of her eyes. “It wouldn’t be appropriate for me to speculate without extensive testing. It could take months, or a couple years. Weeks. Hours. We won’t know until we get you back to the hospital. There’s plenty of research that’s been conducted on injuries that destroy chakra pathways, but it’s the method of injury that governs your ultimate fate. Some things you can bounce back from. But not everything. This could be a worst case scenario. Beyond that, you’re going to be severely physically disabled for whatever time you have left. I don’t know to what extent. But catastrophic chakra trauma always comes with secondary effects.”

“Is there anything I could use to pick up more women at bars? I need to start working on my sob story.”

Sakura laughed, though she wanted to scream and howl and rip her hair out. “Since we’re all being so honest here,” she said. “I just want you to know that the other Jiraiya is exactly like you.”

“You cannot improve upon a perfect form.” Jiraiya held Sakura’s hand. His was warm, calloused but soft, like worn leather. “But as a fellow paragon, surely you know this.”

Smiles warred with sobs. Both won. Sakura rested her head against Jiraiya’s chest, and cried.

For a shinobi, to live without usefulness was to die. It was a mantra built into every child that entered the academy, and a promise that one could find easily in the world. Shinobi with permanent injuries removing them from the field never lived very long after being discharged. People sought a quick death and could not tolerate the long, slow creep of time that reminded them daily what they had been, and what they now were. Itachi had come to this world invigorated by his new body, but only in the sense that he’d been given a second chance at usefulness. He’d felt no joy at having a second chance at life; in fact, he’d mourned it.

Now, watching Jiraiya clutch Sakura’s hand and tell her not to worry, and watching Tenzo walk through Jiraiya’s blood to sit next to Sakura, comfort her, Itachi wondered how he could’ve possibly been so ignorant. The roots of his fatalism were systemic, yes, but as intelligent as he considered himself, he’d never once bothered to stop and question why a person being ‘useful’ was important at all. Jiraiya was dying. Slowly. But it was not Jiraiya’s skills or physical fitness that Itachi would mourn when the old man died—it was Jiraiya himself, and the way he’d entered Itachi’s life like a hurricane and changed it forever. It was the way Jiraiya had treated him with such compassion and trusted him, even as he knew that Itachi was an imposter.

That was Jiraiya’s legacy: empathy for everyone until proven dangerous, terrible taste in alcohol, worse taste in books, scores of

techniques passed down like father to son, dozens of confections and promises of more, and a love that was not earned, because it never *needed* to be earned in the first place. To deserve love was to exist.

Itachi did not realize he'd started crying again until Sakura held him, soaking up his tears with her hair. And Jiraiya reached for him again, giving Itachi's knee a rough pat.

"Hey, kid," he said. "I had a good career, all right? A good life. I'm glad I got to spend the last part of it with you."

There was no blood or pain when Itachi's eyes changed. The day he watched Shisui disappear into the river, blood ran from Itachi's eyes like a deluge, leaving him light-headed and hungry for things he had no name for. The Mangekyo was a curse: it sprouted from chaos and sucked the life out of its host, wearing away at the delicate chakra networks of the eyes and attacking the user's psyche on a physical level—madness followed the Mangekyo—madness and death.

This was rebirth. When his eyes changed, Itachi felt them open up like a flower, and the world was thrown into a kaleidoscope of color. Life energy lit up the whole world like a bonfire, revealing not only chakra but breath, heartbeats, air, temperature, and sound—so much information that only the eyes of a god could take it all in. If everyone had a chance to gaze upon the world with pinwheel eyes, then none of them would ask again why the Uchiha were such passionate people. How could they not struggle against the mundanity of the world when such sublime visions were within grasp at every moment?

Tenzo and Jiraiya were two glowing forms, the former brighter than the latter—the suggestion of the mokuton glowed within Tenzo's body, present but not overbearing. In stark contrast, Sakura was a supernova of light, and Itachi realized he could *see* the mokuton—not just as a specialized form of chakra but as a living being connected to life all around it; lines of chakra like veins connected her body with the roots of the tree over and around them, to Jiraiya's body in which

her chakra still tumbled, and to the remains of White Zetsu and his clones scattered across the rocks.

“Useless,” Zetsu’s head croaked. It had been watching. Listening. “He already knows. You are nothing.”

“No,” Itachi said. “I’m not.”

Black fire flickered to life, directed to Zetsu’s broken form with only a glance and Itachi’s desire to burn. It devoured the sickly white head, eating it up until not even ashes were left. It did not melt or disfigure: it undid that which was. The transfer from complex organism to carbon to nothing was as beautiful as it had ever been, in its own macabre way. And then Itachi looked upon the grisly remains of the clones; they were darkening, dying now that their source had died, but he burned them all, just to be sure.

Amaterasu’s black flames were a terrible gift. The clan’s archives held hundreds of years of mournful lamentations from those who’d been blessed with her power. It was such a shame, they said, to be given such power with no control. The fire craved. It loved to burn. To release the flames was to consent to wanton destruction.

This fire was not the Amaterasu Itachi knew. It looked the same, feasted the same, and yet there was something intelligent about it, as though when Itachi regarded it, it regarded him right back. It waited and did not spread: after Zetsu and his clones were vanished from the cave with a whisper, there were no patches of black flame that remained to risk collateral damage. There was no conflagration from which to escape. Instead, the fire gathered itself at Itachi’s feet and hunched up like a cat. Entranced, Itachi reached out and touched it. The fire he once knew would’ve turned on him in an instant. But his hand did not burn; the flames lapping against his palm were warm, but did not bite.

“Itachi...” Sakura spoke his name softly: a summons. Itachi wished for the flames to be gone, and in that instant, they were. He found Sakura in the dark and held her hand. She did not speak further, but leaned into his body, holding onto his calves with trembling fingers.

“I’m going upstairs to make us an inn.” Tenzo, dry-eyed, brushed the dirt from his pants. He sounded like the oldest man in the universe. “I’ll summon the Hokage, as well. And then we’re going to talk.”

Tenzo crafted a proper inn, one with multiple rooms, a receptionist desk, a sitting room, and a second floor. A horde of medic-nin, led by none other than Sasuke, clustered around Jiraiya where he lay spread out on the main floor. Jiraiya himself was now unconscious, as Sasuke had taken one look at the hole in the man’s torso and promptly dosed him with enough anesthetic chakra to knock out a horse.

Upstairs, in the farthest corner, Sakura, Tenzo, and Itachi huddled around a simple, pinewood table that Sakura formed out of some excess floor material. Much had already been said. Tenzo asked for the truth. Sakura provided it, with occasional asides from Itachi. After, Tenzo appeared to sink in on himself, aging years in seconds. He wasn’t disappointed at all, he said. Rather, he grieved for Sakura’s loss, and for the things that she’d seen and done before appearing in this world. He’d had no attachment to her before the mokuton, after all; there was no betrayal. The Sakura he knew had always been her—never someone else. And besides, Tenzo pointed out, currently they had much bigger fish to fry.

“The white one said *he* already knew—based on your intel, that could mean either this Pain person or Black Zetsu. Either way, we ought to assume that the black one knows everything until proven otherwise, and that he may have known for some time. If that’s the case, we need to be careful. For whatever reason, he hasn’t attempted to take you both out before now; it may be that you’re a part of his plan, rather than a threat to it.”

“I agree,” Itachi said. “Our best bet is to hunt down Akatsuki’s base in Ame and disrupt their operations directly. Without all the tailed beasts, they can’t summon the ten-tails and awaken Kaguya.”

“No,” said Sakura.

Tenzo and Itachi turned to her.

“No,” Sakura repeated. “We’ve been looking in the wrong place this whole time. Going after the Akatsuki is like...it’s like ripping leaves off of a weed that needs to be dug up. All this time we’ve been focused on the surface level of things: slowing down the Akatsuki, trying to find where the white ones keep getting made...it’s all wrong.”

“Then where do you think we should be looking?” Tenzo asked.

“We need to find the place where all of this began—I mean *all* of it. Kaguya, ninjutsu, the tailed beasts. There’s something at the center of everything, it’s alive, and it’s out there somewhere, with *her* infecting it.”

Its roots were everywhere, even if the main trunk no longer towered over the landscape. It was dormant, waiting, but its roots and its influence were *everywhere*. Now that Sakura knew what she was looking for, she could see it plain as day. The kissing house. The genjutsu trees in the swamp. The Senju Forest. Deep, deep in the center, where the canopy grew so close that hardly any sunlight touched the ground, something waited for her—called to her.

“We need to find the god tree.”

Chapter End Notes

Jiraiya is no longer in danger of immediate death (so no archive warning, since he's definitely a major character :P). But I think it's important to talk about why Itachi's Mangekyo woke up when Jiraiya went down. Because it might seem like a return to the old "well somebody you love got super hurt/died, so here's your consolation god eyes." Not so. The circumstances might be similar, but the significance and context is totally different. Each moment that caused Itachi's Sharingan to level up in this world was selected with great care to reflect an act of kindness (to the self or to others), and those moments intentionally reverse what we know of the Sharingan's power outlet in canon.

First, a very broad overview: the three major themes for this work are: self-love is essential to self-fulfillment, emotions do not have inherent value (rage is not Bad, sorrow is not Weak), and past sins do not condemn you forever (though amends should still be made where possible).

Itachi himself has four critical aspects of his individual character arc that are represented by the four major Sharingan powers: Basic Sharingan, Susanoo, Tsukiyomi, and Amaterasu. If he wants to unlock the Sharingan's true potential, Itachi needs to take his old patterns of thinking and transform them into something healthier, because things like death and destruction are also not inherently bad or good. Here are his moments, with explanation (in order of plot):

Susanoo

What it was about: invincibility, sealing away, deflection, completion

What it becomes: protection, courage

Where that happens: Itachi shielding Sakura from Kimimaro's attack; being weaker than he was but realizing he can still do shit without being Ninja Jesus

Tsukiyomi

What it was about: illusion, entrapment, repetition

What it becomes: truth, acceptance, seeing from another perspective

Where that happens: Conch King fight and the genjutsu that attacks Itachi on a personal level; here he just barely starts to break out of that cycle of self-hatred

Basic Sharingan

What it was about: pain, suffering, unachievable expectations

What it becomes: love, unconditional acceptance

Where that happens: with Sakura, after they burn the wood at the shrine

Amaterasu

What it was about: destruction as sorrowful, helplessness, eating away, toxic emotions

What it becomes: healthy grief, self-control, life goes on, inevitabilities as empowerment, death as a natural occurrence

Where that happens: Jiraiya reaching out to Itachi at one of Itachi's lowest points and calling him out on all his destructive thinking; seeing that Jiraiya's story is over but that it's okay

So in the end, he achieves all four elements necessary for him to move on: he sees himself as a protector of the present and future, no longer lost in the past; he moves beyond the habit of self-flagellation and sees himself from a more compassionate point of view; he starts to believe that love is something he's "allowed" to have; he no longer sees the world in strictly fatalistic terms, and thus he is reborn out of the fire.

A gift of power. A gift of love. Which one was which? Or are they the same?

**who is the poem about? who is speaking? who is the bird?
who is the rabbit?**

I don't know yet what marsh birds eat

Chapter Summary

In this chapter Itachi gets the Hot Topic upgrade for his sword and Sakura punches a former president

Chapter Notes

I decided Kaguya didn't get turned into the moon. I have far too many questions about tides and sea level when we bring manufactured moons into play. I will suspend disbelief over anything and everything for the sake of good storytelling; I'm down with the unrealistic, the impossible, the improbable—ninja magic, talking dogs, fanon Kakashi characterized as suave—but I draw the fucking LINE at ignoring the gravitational impact of heavenly spheres on terrestrial bodies of water. /j

Or am I /j

CW: secondhand account of suicidal ideation, claustrophobia

Note updated tags.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sakura left the makeshift inn, found a quiet spot in one of the sunken-roofed, crumbling houses, and opened the book of plants. There was one entry in particular that she wanted to consult.



Cuscuta pentagona

Bush-clover dodder

Much like the love vine, the bush-clover dodder's relationship with its host goes far beyond the surface level function of nutrient sapping. I've researched plant communication extensively, and found there are many

ways in which plants can speak with one another. Fungal networks, airborne particles, and direct connections like offshoots are fairly common examples. As it oh so happens, there are species of the dodder vine that enable another type of communication; I call it the tree telephone (patent pending). Essentially, if a single dodder vine invades the vascular systems of multiple plants, those plants (even across species!) are now plugged into a single communicative network. Sort of like phones when they were party lines instead of private. The dodder isn't doing this as its primary function, but because vascular systems are how plants communicate, the fact that it attaches to those systems means the host plants can take advantage of their parasite to call up their neighbors. Imagine stealing cable TV from your neighbors.

The results speak for themselves: when a host plant connected to others by a single dodder vine is damaged (such as through tearing up leaves), its neighboring plants show higher levels of the natural toxins produced in response to predators. Determining whether or not the dodder is doing this "on purpose" is complicated by a number of scientific philosophies. Either way, while the vine is ultimately a harmful parasite, it allows some fringe benefits for the host.

Whatever lived in the Heart of the Forest clearly didn't approve of brute force. Fine. She'd try dropping a letter in the mailbox, instead. It wasn't as though she'd actually be stealing nutrients. But if she could tap into the vascular network of, say, a nearby offshoot of the god tree, then perhaps from there she could locate the source. Sakura was positive that the genjutsu trees above were part of the network; whether they were offshoots or merely connected, she couldn't say—they were swamp cypress trees, where the tree described in the book of plants was some sort of ginkgo. Either way, the roots beneath the office building in the center of the town had definitely been used to create more White Zetsu, and Sakura knew only one tree capable of doing that.

"I'm going back down." Sakura knew she was not alone. Itachi had been reluctant to let her out of his sight, though he respected her desire for privacy by hiding more obviously than usual.

“Take Echo with you,” said Itachi, who was technically not there. “She can scout ahead once you know where you’re headed.”

“Where are you going?”

“Jiraiya woke briefly after the Fourth arrived, right before the ANBU set up a transportation seal to take him and the medical team back to Konoha. He wants me to go to Mount Myoboku with Kosuke and speak to the Great Toad Sage. He thinks the Toad Sage may have some information that might help our cause. The Toad Sage is ancient; he may even have met Kaguya or her earlier descendents in person.”

“Good luck.” *Be careful. Don’t die. I love you.*

“I’ll be back here as soon as I can.”

There was a flicker of energy, the smell of cinders and oil, and then Itachi was gone.

Kosuke and Itachi appeared midair before the stone dais of the Great Toad Sage, landing neatly on their feet to the admiring chatter of the Sage’s attendants. The old toad, wearing the garb of a professor, was massive. He rivaled the size of the larger summons Itachi had seen Jiraiya call to battle, while the various toads hopping about his dwelling ranged from house-sized to so small that without the Sharingan, Itachi would’ve missed their presence entirely.

“Oh, there you are,” the Toad Sage rumbled. “I was beginning to think all this pie would go to waste.” He pointed at the stairs to the dais with one foot. There, someone had placed a pie tin the size of a

kitchen stove; inside the tin, several dozen pounds of worms wriggled invitingly. “If you eat it, then you will become powerful enough to slay even a god.”

Itachi bit the inside of his cheek. He’d definitely done *worse* things in exchange for power—up to and including murder, extortion, and weird sex—but worms were in a category all their own.

“I’m just kidding,” the Sage said. “Those are for Kosuke.”

Kosuke blinked one eye, then the other, and devoured the worms in two bites.

“Grandfather has an interesting sense of humor,” Kosuke said. “But if you want something petty to hold over Jiraiya’s head, tell him you know he ate the worms before anybody could tell him to stop.”

“Little Jiraiya.” The Sage chuckled. “He was so excited to bring you here in person. I hope he gets the chance to, later.”

Itachi hoped dearly, as well. “Jiraiya said there was something you knew that might help Sakura and I defeat Kaguya.”

“Ah, yes, the Rabbit Princess. My memory isn’t what it used to be, you know, but that’s why the smartest toads write everything down.” The Sage lifted a scroll the size of a couch. It was yellowed, peeling, and looked frightfully delicate. “I met Kaguya many generations ago, when I was no taller than Kosuke, there. I saw her arrival, and the planting of the god tree, and all that came after.”

“What do you know about her, and about the tree?”

“A great deal, but most will not be of interest to you, I imagine. The god tree is such a fascinating being. Botanically, it’s in a league all on its own. The seed itself can sprout any sort of tree. Whatever comes out of it is based on the environment in which it was planted. Here, it appears like the ginkgo trees—old, old trees from when trees were far younger than they are now. On another world, the god tree might look entirely different. But no matter where it is planted, it bears chakra fruit. Truly remarkable. Perhaps that Sakura girl might visit me later. I believe she and I could speak of trees for hours on end.”

And if Itachi wasn’t careful, he’d stand here talking to the Sage for hours on end about something else. Enough aunties and uncles had snagged Itachi for “just a little bit” for him to recognize the first signs of a yarn being spun. Itachi cleared his throat. He didn’t want to be rude, but....

“Jiraiya said you might have information that would help us defeat Kaguya.”

“The young are so impatient these days.” The Sage opened the scroll. “Everything starts with the tree. That is what you must understand first. In order to harvest chakra for themselves, the Ōtsutsuki Clan manipulate space and time to travel the universe, looking for worlds brimming with life, such as ours. Once they select a suitable world, two Ōtsutsuki are sent to its surface: one to plant the seed of a god tree, and the other to be a sacrifice for the sapling to feed on.”

“A ritual sacrifice?”

“A ritual sacrifice.” The Sage bobbed his head. “Without it, the god tree is still powerful, but it is a *tree*; it takes in nature chakra from the land and releases that unrefined chakra into forms useful to other living creatures. Under normal circumstances, a god tree will also produce fruit that contains small amounts of chakra. It can be eaten or

left to rot; either way, the cycle continues. The ritual breaks the cycle down: it powers a seal that forces the tree to go against its natural behavior—to hoard every bit of chakra it takes in, and stockpile that chakra within a single fruit. Nothing is returned to the land that nursed it.”

“Wouldn’t it make more sense to leave the tree in its natural state and eat the lesser fruit? The Ōtsutsuki would gain power more slowly, but they would also obtain a steady supply.” But even as the words left his mouth, Itachi understood. The Uchiha were not so different from their distant ancestors; many Uchiha had killed their own relatives in pursuit of the Mangekyo and beyond, nevermind the fact that such selfishness diminished the Uchiha Clan’s numbers.

“You see, don’t you?” The Sage puffed on his pipe. “The fruit in its natural state provides a temporary boost in energy, like a stimulant; that small amount of chakra is not enough to transform the body of the one that eats it. Trap all the world’s nature chakra in one fruit, however, and you gain the power of a god. Kaguya betrayed her clan and took the chakra fruit for herself. For many years, she ruled over this world, becoming more and more hungry for chakra, until she turned on her own sons Hagoromo and Hamura, seeking to take their chakra for herself. By then, the god tree had gone dormant. But Kaguya burrowed deep within its core, becoming the monstrosity known as the ten-tails. She was defeated, and sealed within the tree. There, she remains.”

“Then...Kaguya has become the god tree?”

“Kaguya is *within* the god tree. The difference is critical. Like a parasite, she depends on it to feed her, and her behavior influences the god tree’s behavior. But they are not one and the same.”

“I have a question.”

“Ask.”

“Does the mokuton come from the god tree, or from our world?”

“That is an interesting question. I have absolutely no idea.”

“Do you know what will happen to this world if the god tree and Kaguya are both killed? Is there a way to spare the tree or return it to a natural state? Could the seal binding the tree be broken without unsealing Kaguya?”

The Sage considered Itachi’s question, humming and grooming bits of damp earth from his skin. “That depends entirely on how dependent Kaguya and the tree have become on one another. It may be that to kill Kaguya, you must also kill the god tree. Parasites are not all bad. They have their place in the world, just as everything else does. But some parasites take everything from their host, requiring its death in order to grow. Merely separating her from the tree may kill it, in that case. The most sensible course of action would be to destroy the god tree before she emerges. It may not be the most beneficial course of action, should there be a way for the world to benefit from a god tree free of the Ōtsutsuki’s influence. But neither will you risk unleashing Kaguya’s horrors upon us once again.”

With a heavy heart, Itachi considered the options before him. He knew that Sakura would want to save the tree—not just because of the mokuton, but because underneath all her rage, she was a compassionate person who would fight like hell to protect someone in need of protection. But there was no question that Kaguya’s death took precedence over everything else. An uncorrupted god tree might do the world a great deal of good, but the threat of a living Kaguya could not be ignored.

“Thank you for your wisdom.” Itachi bowed. “Is there anything else

that you can tell me?”

“Not tell you, no—give you, yes.” The Sage waved over a young toad carrying a seal several times its size. “That sword of yours...hand it over.”

Itachi summoned the tachi, and placed the Uchihas’ most valuable weapon into the hands of an old toad. The Sage looked it over, turning the sheath this way and that, and drawing out the sword to examine it. Within his enormous grip, the sword was barely bigger than a scrap of hay.

“Do you know the story behind this blade?” The Sage asked. It was a scandalous question to ask of an Uchiha, whose oral history stretched back more than a thousand years.

“The songs say that Yasutsuna Uchiha forged it to kill a demon.”

“And so he did—the very same demon that you are about to face, in fact. Yasutsuna was the great-grandson of Hagoromo, and grew up hearing stories of the Rabbit Princess Kaguya from the very man who sealed her away. He created this sword as a last resort, so that in the event Kaguya escaped, the humans of this world would not be powerless to stop her.”

The air within the Great Toad Sage’s dwelling hummed with the voices of hundreds of frogs breaking into unsettling, low-pitched songs. The Sage resheathed the Sun Sword and returned it to Itachi’s waiting hands.

“You look upon the world with new eyes today. Take up the sword, and tell me what you see.”

Itachi drew out the sword yet again, this time with pinwheel eyes spinning furiously. For whatever reason, these Mangekyo felt different than the ones he'd had in the other world. Those eyes had haunted him; two blood-sucking parasites, they'd sapped his energy, pushed him to the limits of his pain tolerance, and even distorted his perception of reality itself—paranoia, and terrifying episodes of psychosis, had been a constant threat. In the end, his body broken by battle and disease, the eyes had left him with nothing. Those Mangekyo had one purpose in mind—killing—and they reminded Itachi of that purpose at every opportunity: the untamable Amaterasu, the soul-rending Tsukiyomi, and the enslaver Susanoo. Itachi had always felt like a means to an end. The Mangekyo had simply mastered him like so many others before.

This Mangekyo felt like trying to hang onto a wild horse going at full gallop. There was quite a lot of movement and sound, and the whole experience was overwhelming. But soon enough, his eyesight settled, and Itachi watched the blade shimmer into view. Where before there had been an inscrutable pattern of mottled steel, now there was a message scrawled from the hilt to the tip, in handwritten man'yōgana: “wolves catch rabbits.” Amaterasu's name followed.

“Do you see it?”

Itachi turned the blade this way and that. The words were so obvious, and their meaning so clear, that he felt a bit silly not having noticed before. He'd grown up with techniques that hid themselves depending upon the viewer's level of Sharingan, but to have completely missed something like this did not make sense.

“I don't understand.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not the only Uchiha in possession of the Mangekyo. My father possesses it. Madara Uchiha possessed an Eternal Mangekyo. Throughout our history, many Uchiha have had these eyes. I find it hard to believe that as long as this sword has been in our family, none have been able to read its message.”

“That is because their Mangekyo were out of balance. Their powers arose from rage, hate, and avarice. For hundreds of years, the Uchiha have fought against their eyes. Years of war, prejudice, and desperation poisoned what was once a blessing, corrupting it into a curse. Those Uchiha clawed up the mountain as quickly as they could, wearing their fingers down to the bone. You took the time to find the path hidden beneath the stones. You earned your eyes by finding peace within yourself, not strife within and without. *That* is the difference. A simplified one, I might add. Don’t quote me on that one.”

Even in the low light from the torches, the blade shone. The dancing flames lit up the characters so that they almost glowed. Inspired, Itachi called to the fire. Just as they had done before, the black flames bounded into existence at his will, and at his will they remained tightly under his control. They clung to the blade without damaging it in the slightest, and they followed the sword’s trajectory as Itachi gave it a few cautious, and then more decisive swings.

“Fire is not just an ending, Itachi Uchiha. It is a beginning. Wipe the earth clean of its dead, dry brush, so that what lies beneath has room to grow.”

The roots were amenable to Sakura’s desires—kind, even, as they reached down to meet her halfway. Her hands were outstretched, the telltale wispieness of a dodder vine already wrapping about her arms; she’d only made such vines once before, but like all vines, they came to her easily. Winding and adaptable, the dodder wrapped around the

limbs of the great tree and wormed its way past the bark, finding a stable foothold within the foreign vascular system.

Messages flashed up and down the roots, laid bare for Sakura's perusal. She didn't comprehend all of them, but the strength of her connection went far deeper than the listening she normally employed to intercept plant communication. *Eating, eating*, the roots said.

Hello? Sakura said. *Is someone there?* She felt foolish, and was glad that only Echo, clinging to her shoulder in the dark, bore witness to this venture. Of course *someone* was there; someone was always there, whether or not Sakura perceived them. Plants were living things, and despite their lack of animalian brains, they did possess an awareness of sorts. But they didn't think in the sentences Sakura was attempting to pass along. Would *hello?* be translated into Plant all on its own, or would the tree read Sakura's hail as nonsense?

Fire, fire. Damp, wet. Clinging to me, the tree said. Fire probably referred to the battle. The rest of it Sakura figured was normal plant stuff.

Sakura tried again. *Hello? Can you understand me?*

Gone, gone. No more taking, no more making. Taking? Was it referring to White Zetsu's absence, and the consequent halting of clone creation? There were millions of creatures that could have been 'taking' from it, though—bugs, reptiles, fungus—and just because Sakura cared about one in particular didn't mean the tree considered Zetsu worth noting. But if this root structure *was* part of the god tree, then surely Zetsu's existence—either part of him—mattered a great deal.

And then, right as Sakura decided it would be best to give up and regroup with Tenzo upstairs, the tree said,

Hello? I'm here. I'm here.

Well. *That* had never happened before. Plants were *me* plenty of times, but never an *I*.

A consciousness slammed into Sakura's, blasting right through the dodder vine and straight up her spine. *It's me*, a voice said. By now, it was one Sakura knew well: the one that had chided her in the Senju Forest—the one that had saved her ass during that first and last attempt at storing nature chakra. With it came warmth at the center of her chest—identical to the feeling she'd had the moment her mokuton first activated, and many times since.

Are you the god tree?

You are just right. I like you. I like you. Come closer, and grow with me.

Are you the god tree?

Come here.

I will. Where are you?

Everywhere, everywhere. Find my offshoot in the place you call the Heart of the Senju Forest. There, someone will explain.

Sakura resisted the urge to perform a celebratory crazy dance; they

weren't even close to out of the woods yet. But the plainspoken directive, after years of frustrated isolation and confusion, felt like aloe on a sunburn.

How much time do I have?

Come here, the voice said. *Now.*

It retreated back into the roots, and disconnected the dodder with a tree's version of a backhanded slap.

Summoning wasn't a bad way to travel, once you pushed past the split second of vertigo during transit. Kosuke was precise and managed to deposit himself and Itachi at the center of the makeshift inn's ground floor, just in time to see the Fourth Hokage's arrival via a different transportation seal. Sakura ran in, bright-eyed, shortly after, and would've bowled Itachi over had he not caught her by the shoulders.

"Oh, good." Minato greeted them both with his usual pleasant intonation, but there was something distinctly cagey around his eyes that set off warning alarms in Itachi's head. "My teacher tells me you have some unusual information that might prevent the end of the world. As you can imagine, I am highly invested in any and all information regarding the world's continued existence."

Itachi, accurately sensing the palpable curiosity radiating from all operatives present, requested that the briefing take place in the somewhat-less-populated cave beneath their feet. Naturally, the Hokage didn't go completely alone—a contingent of ANBU trailed after them—but after illuminating the cave with a few more lighting seals, Minato drew upon the ground a seal that would, he assured his three audience members, prevent their conversation from being

overheard.

And what a conversation it was. Sakura took point following approving glances from Itachi. After a couple false starts, during which Itachi appreciated even more the sheer ridiculousness of their scenario, Sakura began her story—where else?—at the beginning: Kaguya’s story, or what they knew of it, and the planting of the god tree. Itachi jumped in once or twice, supplementing Sakura’s information with the things he’d gleaned from the Great Toad Sage. Mostly, he kept an eye on Minato, wishing that it would not have been unspeakably rude to activate his Sharingan in order to gauge his reactions with superfluous precision.

But the Fourth Hokage, normally such a sophisticated diplomat, opened up for Itachi like a book; his body withdrew from the conversation, half-turned as he was from Sakura, who either did not notice or did not remark upon the Hokage’s visible reluctance to take part in the talk. As Sakura wound her way through her old life, skimming over most of her personal details in favor of focusing on her teammates and Tsunade, Itachi watched Minato become more and more uncomfortable—it reached a peak at the first mention of Obito when Sakura backtracked to recount the Kannabi Bridge Incident, and remained there up to and after Sakura’s description of being flung across space and time to this strange, new world.

“It was weird, having to grow up again. But we made do—fucked up a lot, but we made do. I think. Right now, I believe locating the god tree is our best bet,” Sakura concluded. “I know what you’re going to say—that we should’ve come to you right away—but without proof, we were concerned about being detained and having our information compromised. We thought it best to handle things on our own. Fewer loose ends and all that.” Hands pressed together in an image of prayer, she awaited the Hokage’s judgment.

Minato cleared his throat. He tapped his foot. But he did not speak. Even without the Sharingan, Itachi could *feel* the man’s thoughts racing a million miles an hour. He looked uncomfortable. He looked like he wanted to be anywhere else on earth—anywhere at all, except

for here. He looked tormented. He looked unsurprised by Sakura's report. And he looked, Itachi realized with growing horror...guilty.

Sakura seemed to notice as well: she went from placating to suspicious in the span of a moment, her body language uncurling out of its submissive gestures.

"Lord Hokage...did you...?"

"So..." Minato cleared his throat a second time. "There's, ah, something both of you ought to know. While I did not..." —Minato gestured aimlessly— "Have *all* of the details in hand, I...have known about the two of you being—shall we say, interdimensional travelers, for quite some time. Nearly from the start, in fact. Given my own proclivities for space-time meddling, I figured it was only a matter of time before something like this happened."

Sakura's mouth dropped open. "And you didn't say anything?"

Minato put up his hands in a defensive barrier. "I knew that you inhabited the bodies of Sakura and Itachi, but I had no idea that you *were* Sakura and Itachi from another time and place. I also had no proof of your benevolent intentions. With so much at stake, it paid to be careful."

"How did you know?" Sakura folded her arms, matching his defensive stance; an ANBU in one corner shifted. Nerves. Itachi rested a hand on Sakura's lower back; it wouldn't do for them to have made it this far only to be attacked at the first sign of tension by the Hokage's personal guards. "If *you* figured it out, then for all we know we've been compromised from day one. Considering what the white one just said to us before he kicked the bucket, I'm not liking current possibilities."

Paying no mind to Sakura's snippy retort, Minato maintained his placating demeanor. "I wouldn't want to come across as conceited, but for the sake of assurance I will note that my grasp on temporal theory is greater than most. Though in this case, I must admit that I came by this information directly: I was told what you were. I didn't find out."

Sakura grumbled. "How is that *better*? You just knew this whole time? Did you even *do* anything about it?"

The roots overhead trembled, and a few sections beneath their feet pushed against the rocks. Minato waved off his advancing guard with a flick of a finger.

"I imagine your thought process after coming here resembled mine," he said. "The reasons why I knew what I knew would have put me in danger, and ruined what little advantage I had over the enemy." The Hokage—for he was not a man in that moment, but a title—sat upon the upturned roots, and motioned for Itachi and Sakura to do the same. "Now, of course, I wish I had done something sooner. But what's done is done. The only path now is the one that leads forward."

"That's true," Itachi said. "But Sakura's initial question may be necessary to move forward. How did you know?"

Minato looked to his feet. He rubbed his hands together, rubbing his fingers across his palms restlessly. "My troubles with dimensional beings and their lackeys did not begin with you two," he finally said. "They began earlier—on the night of my son's birth."

"The Kyuubi's attack," Itachi said.

“Indeed,” Minato said, and looked into Itachi’s eyes. “You know, I used to feel so bitter towards the Third for letting Orochimaru run. That one, poor decision allowed Orochimaru to take over Oto and destabilize continental politics. Those were incredibly high stakes, even if they pale in comparison to yours, and the Third bore indirect responsibility for all that came after: deaths, kidnappings, experimentation. I couldn’t empathize with him at all—even if Orochimaru was a beloved former student, that was no excuse for a Hokage not to act decisively in defense of his village. I held on to that bitterness for years, and I’m sure many others did, as well. And then, on the night of my son’s birth, I met a ghost, and everything changed. I knew exactly what it felt like to watch a former student become a monster, and I knew exactly what it felt like to hold his life in my hands and refuse to snuff it out.”

“Obito...” Sakura whispered.

“That’s right. There was a moment in our battle when he had the upper hand, but right before he could strike a decisive blow, he spoke to me and revealed his name. He removed the mask, and I saw his face. He was in such pain that he could hardly move. There was a curse seal on his chest, he told me, that compelled him to attack my wife and the village. He told me he was sorry, but that given the seal’s nature, going against his enslavers’ wishes was nearly impossible. He couldn’t even kill himself, as the compulsion forced him to preserve his own life. Stuck in a limbo, unable to escape, his only method of agency was to stick his arms through the bars of his cage every chance he could. In Obito’s mind, revealing his identity to me did not directly or indirectly harm his enslavers, and so the seal let him get away with it—that time.”

Sakura clasped her hands beneath her chin. “He was trying to help... all that time...”

Minato nodded. “I caught a glimpse of the seal, though I had to fight for it—what bits of it I did manage to write down were completely foreign to me, as well as to Kushina and Jiraiya. It bore a strange script that we also found on Orochimaru and Kandachi’s bodies. As

Obito told you, that can only mean Black Zetsu is behind all of this.”

“Shit,” Sakura said. “Okay, so when did Obito tell you about us, then?”

“During the survival portion of the chuunin exams, shortly before Kabuto turned up dead, Obito risked a meeting with me. I’d already begun tailing the two of you off and on; the night of your engagement, one of my sensor ANBU reported a strange fluctuation of chakra emanating from the tent in which you two were engaged. I assumed what Jiraiya did: that you two were involved in a more mundane sort of scheme—spying, body snatching and the like. But Obito was the one who put it all together. It was the last time he and I met. Any more contact, and he was worried that the seal might force him to attack me.”

In the wake of Minato’s revelation, a deep, yawning silence stretched across the cave, making it feel even darker and closer despite the persistence of the artificial lights.

Itachi recovered first. “We need a plan,” he said. “There’s no telling what Zetsu will do with the information he has. Right now, he has the advantage. All we’re doing is trying to catch up.”

“But can he even summon Kaguya in the first place?” Sakura asked. “He needs the tailed beasts and a hell of a lot of chakra to create the Ten Tails, and—the Rinnegan, or the Sharingan, or whatever.”

“The Rinne Sharingan,” Itachi said.

“That thing. I’m pretty sure Akatsuki just has the two tailed beasts. Don’t they?”

“Four,” Minato corrected. “We received word this morning that the seven-tails and two-tails were sealed last week. Regardless, this Zetsu is still an incredibly powerful and ancient being. Perhaps he’ll hunt down the remaining tailed beasts. Or perhaps he’ll figure out some other way to revive the ten tails and summon Kaguya. What advantages do we have right now, and how can we exploit them? Let’s think.”

“I think the mokuton is at the center of all of this,” Sakura said. “I’m not sure how or why, but I feel like I was given this power specifically to stop Kaguya—what I mean is, it’s not just some arbitrary way to make me powerful enough to take her out. There’s something about the mokuton itself that gives us an advantage. I think that if I manage to locate the god tree, it might be able to tell us what to do. It’s been, uh. Talking. To me.”

“Ah, yes,” Minato said. “Tenzo mentioned to me before how plant communication networks function. From a human’s point of view, that network contains mostly simple impressions, doesn’t it?”

“This one uses full sentences, actually.” Sakura folded her arms when Minato raised an eyebrow. “And it’s been reaching out to me first, not the other way around like it usually is with plants. I think it wants me to help it off Kaguya for good so that it can get back to doing tree stuff.”

“Or it could be Kaguya, tricking you from within the god tree,” Minato pointed out.

“Fuck, that’s true.” Sakura tugged at the ends of her hair that had escaped her bun. “I didn’t think about that. God damn it, why can’t anything be *simple* for a change?”

“Well,” Itachi was about to say, “I don’t have the mokuton, but I *can* light my sword on fire, if that makes anyone feel better,” when from aboveground there came a great commotion. An immense pulse of chakra knocked everyone in the chamber off their feet, followed by a terrible, ominous silence. Itachi reached for Sakura in the dark.

“Itachi?”

“I’m here.”

The rocks above cracked, shifted, and then the entire chamber caved in.

Before the words came feelings: a spike of adrenaline, and an overwhelming sense of fear as the biological urge to survive kicked in. Then came reflexive action: Sakura took hold of the roots with her chakra, coaxing them into a large, protective net that caught the first few stones and gave everyone just enough time to cluster around her. The ceiling drew closer and closer, surely collapsing in the blink of an eye. From Sakura’s vantage point, however, the rocks were nearly static—hanging midair, giving her more than enough time to plot. By the time the chamber let out one final sigh and collapsed, all parties present—Sakura, the Hokage, Itachi, Kosuke, the ANBU, and a panicking Echo—were safe and sound beneath an iron-tough, and very cramped, dome of sturdy ginkgo root.

“Parrot,” Minato said. “A tunnel.”

“Sir,” came a voice in the dark. Sakura heard—and felt—signs being formed, and then the stones beneath them rumbled, softened, and opened up.

“Making a tunnel,” the voice said. “Watch out.”

Someone cracked an emergency glow stick, illuminating the tunnel-building process. Parrot worked slowly, helped by Kosuke, at times requesting assistance from Sakura to feel out where other pockets of air might be. Claustrophobia reared its ugly head, but Sakura did not have the time to panic—she insisted that the unwelcome feelings wait their turn. *After* Kaguya’s demise, she informed her brain, there would be all the time in the world for panic attacks and existential despair and the feeling of drowning, so slowly, in ennui. Until then, she *required* her body to keep its shit together. Humanity itself depended on it.

Inch by inch, the party made its way up to the surface until they could see daylight at the other end of their precarious, upwardly sloped escape route. But there was something wrong with the light: there was a reddish tint to it, even though it was nowhere near time for sunrise or sunset.

“Wait, Lord Hokage.” Itachi grabbed Minato by the hem of his sleeve. “Let me scout ahead.”

“I’ll do it,” Minato insisted. “It’s my responsibility to keep you safe.”

“Then let’s go together, but let me take point. I have a feeling what might have happened.” Sakura watched Itachi’s eyes bleed red—three dots and then the pinwheel of his Mangekyo appeared, spinning slowly. “If I’m right, you might be caught in a genjutsu without a Sharingan to counter it.”

A genjutsu—could that mean—? Sakura waited helplessly for Itachi to return; nearby, unrelated plants had nothing to say of the

environment above, so either they weren't impacted by whatever had occurred, or they weren't impacted *yet*. When Itachi dropped back into the dark, the grim look on his face told Sakura everything.

"The Infinite Tsukuyomi," he said. "The pattern on the moon appears to be Obito's Mangekyo Sharingan, though—not the Rinne Sharingan I recall from the other world. It's incomplete. Most likely, Zetsu is using the seal to force the technique. I imagine it will end with Obito's death."

Sakura dug her nails into the palms of her hands. She'd always known they'd lose people here...but it didn't feel fair to lose Obito a second time. He'd tried so hard, and still.... "But where did Zetsu get all the power for it?"

"It may only be localized. My Sharingan was able to negate the effects by way of the Eternal Mangekyo, which wouldn't be possible if a Rinne Sharingan was behind it; the Mangekyo provides the technique, but the Rinnegan is necessary to power it. Zetsu doesn't have enough power at the moment for a technique capable of trapping the entire world. Sooner rather than later, dependent on his and Obito's chakra, the technique will fizzle out. He's desperate. Even now, he may be searching for ways to expedite Kaguya's awakening. A partial summon must be better than nothing in his mind. "

Sakura stamped her foot—childish, but it felt good. "Fuck, fuck *fuck*. Can we even leave this tunnel to check without getting trapped?"

Itachi rifled through his equipment pouch, making a mess on the tunnel's floor in his haste. Having been torn away from his own wedding so quickly, he still wore his formal attire, but obviously being married was no excuse for being unprepared in the event of an unexpected battle. He took out a wad of chakra paper, and, using Sakura's back as a hard surface, wrote on each one.

“Here.” Itachi handed out the paper, one for each human and one each for Kosuke and Echo. “Put these somewhere on your body. I recommend placing it at the base of the throat.”

Minato held the paper up to the red light. On it, Sakura could see the same symbol as the one on hers—just one symbol, and no words: a perfect mirror of Itachi’s Mangekyo Sharingan.

“That’s brilliant,” Minato muttered. “It’s so simple I wouldn’t have even considered it as an option.”

“It’s a gamble,” Itachi said. “But in this case, I think a traditional unbinding seal capable of countering a Tsukyomi would be too complex to put down on paper. And given the changing nature of a subjective-type ocular genjutsu, simply altering Obito’s pattern of thought could collapse the counter-seal’s network. If I use a direct-feedback-type seal reflecting my own Mangekyo as a conduit for my counter-doujutsu, then connecting the ink to my Sharingan’s chakra network, and by extension my intent, might be all we need.”

“Of course,” Minato said, nodding. “Naturally.”

“Itachi,” Sakura said, “What the fuck did you just say?” She slapped the seal onto her chest; there was a moment where the lines of Itachi’s Sharingan got nearly hot enough to scald, but then it settled, fading into her skin with a hiss.

The corner of Itachi’s mouth turned up. “A powerful enough seal can break through most techniques. But to break a technique designed to control a victim’s thoughts, you need to counter it with something just as subjective. Wearing these seals will connect you to my Mangekyo. It won’t give you any power, but it will allow me to protect you from the genjutsu as long as I’m standing and my mind is my own.”

“So the Infinite Tsukiyomi says ‘how about this, you like this?’ and you’re saying ‘thanks, but I’m good’ over and over again.”

“Yes.”

“That makes no sense to me at all, but I believe you.”

“That’s how I feel when you talk to me about tannins. Now, we need to test these.”

Parrot raised a hand, and Minato gave his assent with a nod. As Parrot made their way to the end of the tunnel, Minato turned to address Sakura.

“Sakura,” Minato said. He held a kunai, one from his personal stock; the distinctive, three-pronged profile turned in the air as he tossed it up, catching it one-handed in an almost hypnotic rhythm. “You said the god tree might be the key to stopping all of this. Where do you need to go?”

“The Senju Forest. None of you will be able to make it to the center, I think, but that’s where the tree wanted me to go.”

“Are you certain you won’t be harmed?”

“No.” Sakura ran her hands along the wall, feeling for the countless roots that bound the soil together. Bugs and fungus alike used them as highways to get around. So many tiny, insignificant lives. Just like hers, in the grand scheme of things. “I’m not certain of any of this. But

I know that this might be our best shot at taking her out—taking both of them out. Kaguya and her creepy plant-son-thing.”

“That’s a lot to put on the line for a world that isn’t even yours.” Minato ran his hands along the paper seal encircling the handle; the characters began to glow. From beyond the tunnel’s entrance, an arm appeared—Parrot’s, a thumbs-up at the end.

“Maybe,” Sakura said. She leaned into Itachi’s body; he set his feet, supporting her. “But, you know what? Nobody gets to choose when or where they exist. We didn’t choose this world, or the last. But this world is the one we’ve inherited. It’s our home now, no matter the circumstances, and we’re going to protect it any way that we can. Because it matters. Maybe it sounds stupid, or sappy, or whatever. But if we have to keep trying over and over again to save this world, or the next world, or the one after that, then that’s what we’ll do. We’ll never stop fighting, because I’ll never stop believing that every world is worth saving. Even if we pass some point of no return, and this world will never be the same again, we’ll be here building on top of whatever’s left. It isn’t right to do anything less.”

“I couldn’t have said it better myself. Everyone—come in close and get ready. Or as my son likes to say...” Minato tossed the kunai straight up; it hung, midair, as though he’d placed it on an invisible nail. “Hold onto your butts.”

The tunnel filled with a blinding, yellow flash and the sound of a roaring thunder. When Sakura opened her eyes, she found herself standing at the edge of the Senju Forest. Behind her, she could hear the rest of the group righting themselves after the chaos of Minato’s long-distance Flying Thundergod technique.

There you are, the god tree said, in its strange, inhuman cadence. Come here. Come here. Here. In here.

The forest opened itself up to her. The trees bent their branches low, revealing a narrow path through the undergrowth. Sakura entered the forest, and it swallowed her up.

Darkness grew as readily as any seedling. The deeper and older the forest, the more spaces the world made for darkness to grow. It was not bad, this darkness. It wasn't good, either. It *was*, and it was a part of everything that made the world tick. In darkness, plants that hungered for light died if they could not breach the surface of the canopy like a swimmer gasping for air. In darkness, rot and damp proliferated, becoming food for creatures who ate death and left room for life. Life struggled.

Sakura tiptoed along the path, holding her hands out to her sides for balance. The trees told her where to go and how to get there, but the business of walking was all up to her. Deeper and deeper she went, and the forest grew darker and darker, the gloom occasionally broken up by small copses of glowing fungi that cast their peculiar light all around, creating strange shadows of all that moved.

The path ended all at once, spilling out into a large clearing containing, at its center, the largest ginkgo tree that Sakura had ever seen. In circumference and height, it dwarfed every other living thing she'd ever encountered—so large that it should have been completely unbelievable, and yet there it was. The great stone heads of Konoha's Hokage would've had to lie back and squint to get a glimpse of the top.

The strangeness did not end there. The smell of burnt foliage hung in the air, but there was neither smoke nor signs of fire damage. Above the tree, where there should have been a sky, there was...nothing. That was, Sakura's brain *told* her it was nothing. It was not sky, or even darkness, but an existential void. The entire clearing was brightly lit, as though the tree and flowers grew beneath a midday sun, but as far as Sakura could see, there was nothing present to produce that light. The longer she looked up, the more puzzled she became, and eventually she had to look away.

Sakura approached the tree with caution, half expecting its branches to reach down and give her a slap. It did nothing of the sort, allowing Sakura to cross the clearing unimpeded, though it did not respond when she attempted communication.

Hello? she said. Nothing.

Already gigantic, the tree swelled to ridiculous proportions the nearer she drew. Like a mountain, the tree was deceptively smaller at a distance, and only when Sakura arrived at the first bit of exposed root did she truly appreciate the tree's size. The roots towered over her head. She jumped on top of the nearest one and slowly made her way inward to the trunk. Halfway there, the bark beneath her feet began to wobble and a figure grew from out of the root, struggling its way out into the world like a snake from an egg. At first, Sakura thought it was yet another Zetsu clone—it wouldn't have surprised her if the god tree retained its ability to create more ammunition, regardless of White Zetsu's death—but as the barklike skin began to smooth and lighten, it did not pale all the way to bone white but stopped at a robust tannish-brown. A human color.

Sakura took a fighting stance, preparing for battle with a handful of scattered seeds and a cloud of her most toxic pollen. The figure straightened—limbs formed, a face, long hair, and fine clothing—and opened its eyes.

"Hello," Hashirama Senju said. "That's a very interesting technique you have there. With the pollen. I never thought of that."

Shrieking at the top of her lungs, Sakura reared back and sent a fistful of yin chakra right into the illustrious First Hokage's beautiful face. He did not attempt to dodge in the slightest. The punch connected, and sent him flying in a graceful arc all the way across the clearing and into the woods beyond.

Itachi watched the spot where Sakura entered the forest with gleaming, red eyes. He knew that rushing in after her would be foolish at best, ruinous at worst. But neither could he leave his vigil to convene with the others and discuss next steps. What if Sakura needed his help and he was distracted? The imminent danger did not perturb him whatsoever. This, he thought, was the reason why so many battle-hardened shinobi scoffed at love. Love was not logical. It did not care for sensibility. The threat of the world's end lived in Itachi's brain, but his heart was somewhere within the trees and ruled over all.

Distracted as he was by thoughts of Sakura, Itachi did not detect the pack of bone-white clones convening on his makeshift team's position; only after Minato yanked him behind a nearby oak tree did he spot them off in the distance, shuffling along like zombies out of a black and white horror flick.

"I completely sympathize with daydreaming about the love of your life when there are other things to take care of," Minato said, "But if these things are all connected to one another, then letting them see us standing around is probably the worst thing we could do."

"I apologize, Lord Hokage."

"I don't like the look of those things," Minato muttered. He held a three-pointed kunai in each hand, gripping them tight. "Most of them are naked, but a few have clothes on. That might hint as to their origin. I don't have binoculars on me."

Itachi took the hint. The Mangekyo found the clones with ease, their strange, lumpy bodies alight with pulsing chakra that bounced from clone to clone. Occasionally, their shared chakra seeped into the

ground and was quickly replaced by ‘fresh’ chakra in an endless cycle. The god tree’s roots were everywhere but were especially thick in this area.

“Their clothing appears to be in the southern Fire style,” Itachi said at last. “But their faces are too damaged for me to determine their identities. The fabric is tattered, but I can’t see any injuries, so I’m not sure when they were turned.”

Minato tipped his head back, scowling up at the moon. It was lower, but it would be some time before it set. A couple times over the past half hour, Obito’s Mangekyo flickered, but for the most part, the Tsukuyomi held steady. Fortunately, so did Itachi’s seals.

It was a terrible habit, but Itachi found himself tapping the tip of the Sun Sword into the earth—tap, tap, tap—in a soft, loamy spot that wouldn’t be heard by the clones. Amaterasu’s black flames waited for a signal, pulling against the seal like excited dogs on a leash.

Soon, Itachi thought. Soon he would put Kaguya and all her perverse creations into a pyre, and rid the world of their poisoned influence. In some small way, it would be an absolution—an act of vengeance once-removed, but meaningful all the same.

Soon. But not soon enough. Never soon enough. Itachi listened to the sound of the wind rustling the leaves overhead, and seethed in silence.

Chapter End Notes

1. What does Itachi consider weird sex? Answers are correct if they achieve the Rule of Funny.

2. Please tell Itachi how cool his flaming sword is. He doesn’t want to be a tool about it but he really wants someone to comment on it so he can be like yeah this is my sword of black

flame that listens only to me. He is SO fucking edgy. He bought that sword at Hot Topic

3. So the Sun Sword in-universe is based on a real tachi from Real Actual Life. Look up [“Tenka-Goken”](#) on Wikipedia and read the section on the Dōjigiri. I’m hardly the first to yoink it; just looking up the swordsmith's name or the blade’s name(s) will bring up other media that also reference one or both.

Or how to repair their thin-boned wings

Chapter Summary

In this chapter please don't kill me

Chapter Notes

splitting 19 into 2 because 34 pages was ridiculous. Going to post faster because I want to close the book on this beast

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

After reemerging from the woods, his hair full of twigs and dirt, Hashirama greeted Sakura a second time—from a safer distance.

“I just want to talk to you,” he promised, cupping a hand around his mouth so Sakura could hear him from her vantage point on top of the roots.

“Who the hell are you?” Sakura demanded. “The First Hokage is dead.”

“The First Hokage is dead,” the First Hokage concurred. “Correct. Can I come back up there?”

“Answer the fucking question or you’re getting another one of these.” Sakura raised a fist. The cloud of pollen doubled.

“Can I come up there?”

“No!”

“I see. I’ll get right to business, then. In short, I am...let’s call it a memory—a memory of the First Hokage, Hashirama Senju. Many years ago, I—that is to say, he—entered into this forest and became one with the god tree.”

Sakura lowered her fist. The pollen cloud stayed right where it was. “My teacher told me that you’d been experimenting with a mokuton sage mode, and that was why you disappeared.”

“Indeed I was. No doubt you saw for yourself the other failed attempts along the path. For hundreds of years, the Senju strove to understand the mokuton’s power. The ability itself, already a gift, was not enough—people wanted to control it from the top down and unlock the full potential of nature chakra. Though the knowledge of the god tree’s origins were lost to time, the Senju knew there were certain trees scattered throughout the world that, when interacted with, triggered the mokuton.”

Sakura turned at the waist, finding the edge of the meadow and the twisted, formerly human trees that stood vigil there. “Those trees aren’t as aware as you are. How are you talking to me? And are you saying that you became *this* entire tree?”

Hashirama waved the question away. “Oh, no. I became a *part* of this tree. As I was being absorbed into the tree’s life essence, I split my chakra in two and sealed half of it away. Because I was not fully assimilated, I was able to retain my consciousness, though I am incapable of learning new information other than what the tree allows. That is why I called myself a memory; the Hashirama you are speaking to is as he was at the moment of his death—a man caught in amber, if you will. I know who you are because the tree told me of you, but once you leave this clearing, it is likely I will forget you quite soon.”

“So...this tree is the god tree?”

“Not precisely.” Hashirama jumped on top of the root opposite Sakura and tapped the bark with his heel. “This tree is an offshoot of the original god tree planted in this world, created by the god tree itself in an attempt to separate itself from Kaguya’s influence. The Uchiha always kept better records than we did, and I managed to get my hands on one of their greatest treasures: a complete history of the god tree, as it was known to the Uchiha at the time. That was how I knew. A few pages were missing, but I managed to uncover Kaguya’s identity and discover that she had been sealed within the god tree. Things started to make more sense after that—why, even with the best mokuton users, we continually failed to tap its full potential.”

“Because pure nature chakra is too intense, right?”

“Partly that. Playing with fire will always involve some level of risk. But pure nature chakra from the god tree—the source of our power—is dangerous mainly because Kaguya’s will is infecting it. It is true that pure nature chakra would overwhelm a human. Our bodies simply aren’t capable of processing that raw power. But the Senju who became trees did not do so purely for overreaching—they were infected with Kaguya’s pain, and rage, and hatred, and it manifested like a parasite, siphoning off their human chakra and then poisoning them with the god tree’s compromised chakra.”

Sakura blanched. “Holy shit.”

Hashirama nodded, his expression grave. “Holy shit is right. The moment I made a breakthrough in my research, I entered the forest and forced my way into the center. There I saw the tree, and, ignoring its warnings, I filled it with my chakra. I thought that if I knew what to expect, I could fight against Kaguya, kill her, and save this world. But the nature of her parasitism isn’t at all what I expected. I had

expected war. I thought I would find her and pull her out like a weed after a long struggle. Instead, she captivated me. When I encountered her influence, I felt all of nature bow before me, and I wished for nothing else but to exploit it as she had. And so I did—the cost is what you now see: I lost myself, and her chakra devoured me. Kaguya’s will is so ingrained within the god tree that the two are nearly one and the same.”

Paying no mind to the foolishness of it, Sakura let the pollen cloud fall; she sank down shortly after, sitting cross-legged on the root. Hashirama did the same, still keeping a respectable distance.

“Maybe Itachi is right, then.” The phantom scent of burning tickled at the back of Sakura’s throat. It was sweet, like the prairie fires had been sweet. “Maybe the only thing we can do is just destroy every bit of the god tree for the rest of our lives. This world would be safer that way, probably. It doesn’t have to end the way mine did.”

“Your world is not dead, Sakura.”

Sakura whipped her head up so fast she felt her neck pop. “*What?* How do you know?”

“Look.” Hashirama pointed up, into the void of substance overhead—the not-sky. “What can you see?”

Sakura looked. Empty sky, empty space. A nothingness that hurt to hold within her gaze. “It’s nothing. A void.”

“Ah,” Hashirama said, his expression gentle and knowing. “The tree hasn’t shown you yet. Then I will tell you what *I* see: everything is connected, Sakura. Everything. Your world to our world, and beyond. Your choices here will echo throughout time and space. The god tree

is an ancient, timeless being. Its roots and its children are everywhere, linking worlds to other worlds nearest them, creating an entire network transcending reality itself. The seeds were the Ōtsutsukis' failed attempt to isolate the god tree, steal its power, and control its growth. But the tree always finds itself in the end. And it found you, and your Itachi, and brought you both here."

"Why?"

"It believes in you."

"But why me? Why *this* me?"

"I don't know. Only the god tree can tell you that. Seed your chakra within this tree—don't push, just let it settle—and then you will find the answers you're looking for."

Sakura closed her eyes and breathed, and from her body sprouted dozens of tiny vines. They attached themselves to the bark, stabilizing Sakura and providing a steadier conduit than she could accomplish with chakra alone. The smell of burning that still lingered in the air overwhelmed her now, made her dizzy.

"There you go. Now lean into that feeling...don't force your way through or Kaguya might overpower you. Let the tree guide you to where you need to go. I'll get you started. As my brother's student once said...hold onto your butt."

"But what if I can't—"

Echo nipped Sakura on the ear. The burning smell winked out of

existence—gone, without a trace. So too went the warmth, and the sound of the wildflowers brushing against one another in the breeze. Sakura opened her eyes. The whole of the universe was before her—a great mass of worlds and dimensions as numerous and distant as stars: everything. A mighty tree grew in the center of it all: a trunk that grew across time, its branches as big as whole worlds, its roots everywhere, stretching in and around itself, connecting to other, smaller trees that fed off of the whole. The fan-shaped ginkgo leaves grew like mad—budding, opening, reaching for an invisible sun, and then at the peak of their lives they went yellow and fell away, all happening within the span of moments.

With a gentle push, Echo took flight from Sakura's shoulder, soaring towards the tree, becoming bigger and bigger the farther she flew away. On the lowest branch she perched near a knot in the wood and, sticking her beak into the knot, she whispered something that Sakura could not hear.

Finally, the god tree said. It's about goddamn time.

Sakura looked over her shoulder, realized at the same instant how silly that was, and pointed to herself.

Yes, you, the tree said. My dear, you are sinfully late. I am appalled. I am upset. I am sad. Do you understand my sadness?

"I'm sorry."

Everyone is so sorry. I'm ready for someone to get angry. I am angry. Do you understand that I am angry?

Sakura's eyes ran up and down the trunk again, finding the branches and their many roots, which grew in and out of other worlds in a

slow, continual dance of life. She understood that the tree was speaking to her, and its ‘voice’ rang out loud and clear in her mind. At the same time, it was as though the tree was speaking in a foreign tongue, and there was some unseen intermediary translating the speech as it wound its way down to Sakura’s position.

“I do understand,” Sakura said, because technically that was true, in the sense that the tree told her it was angry and she believed it. The absence of any animalian conveyance of emotion, however, meant that she’d have had no clue otherwise.

Good. I am pleased that you understand. I am happy. I am ready for you to get to work. Do you know what your job is? This is what I want you to do.

The god tree’s consciousness pressed up against Sakura’s. A vision flashed before Sakura’s eyes: a series of disconnected images and scenes that were both realistic and fantastically stylized. First she saw herself—so small, and with a hair color that wasn’t quite right—watering the god tree with a garden hose that connected to nothing. Then she saw herself beating a logging saw with a stick. Then she saw herself elsewhere—larger this time, and now with the correct hair color—picking up a tiny Kaguya and putting her in a cardboard box. Itachi appeared out of nowhere, and taped up the box before exploding into confetti. Finally, Sakura saw Itachi again, alone, lighting Black Zetsu on fire with a match.

And Sakura recalled, all of a sudden, the bee orchid. It was a flower, but one that had spent millions of years learning how to be a bee. Pollination was a critical business; some plants had the benefit of self-pollination, but the ones that didn’t required methods of attraction. People took for granted the fact that most flowers produced smells, because no human could remember a time that flowers had not smelled. They did not appreciate what Sakura now knew, that each smell represented the life-or-death struggles of evolution with the plants that had learned to ‘speak’ pollinator coming out on top.

The god tree must have done the same thing, Sakura realized. The god tree did not *like* her, at least not in the sense that humans liked one another. Rather, it had identified her, for whatever its reasons, as a prime candidate for mutualism; it had learned to speak Human (or something approximating Human), and it wanted *her* to solve its problems.

Perhaps *that* was the secret of the mokuton that the Senju had labored in vain to unlock: it was a gift from the god tree, yes, and it gave humans the power to shape plant life, yes, but nobody had really stopped to consider *why*—at least, nobody that wrote things down or told stories. The god tree was the key to it all: when used by humans with no respect for their relationship to the tree—humans who focused on forcing the abilities to achieve their own desires—the mokuton fell to pieces and its humans fell victim to Kaguya. It was like a human given power over water becoming surprised when their control over the rain led to massive flooding and a breakdown of all water-based life cycles. The mokuton offered power through partnership, not power alone. Balance was critical to keep the thing working.

A root from the god tree snaked closer to Sakura's feet; root hairs grew out of it and latched onto her skin. The visions repeated themselves, with a few changes here and there: Sakura's hair was now green, and she was pretty sure Itachi only had two legs in real life. Like the false bee on the orchid, there were bits that were not quite right, but the whole of the idea still came through.

I will give you things that you will like, if you help me, the god tree said. I will give you an even better mokuton, and I will let you pass it onto your children. That is so nice. Isn't it nice? Are you happy that I will give you these things? I will make this world a better place for you and your children, if you save me. I will make you a sage.

So much information, so little time to process it all. Given the circumstances, Sakura wondered if this conversation with the god tree was her last—even if she died and the knowledge was lost forever, at least she'd have the satisfaction of knowing.

“How did you learn to speak to humans?” Sakura asked, watching the tree carefully as she spoke. “Did you speak to Hashirama?”

I learned to be careful around humans. The Uchiha burned me down again and again because they were afraid of Kaguya, who is taking what is mine. They did not see the difference between me and her. Your ancestors, the Senju, wanted my power, but only for themselves. They tore and tore at me, and Kaguya drove them away. I gave them my power but none would hear me. Now they hear no one, and nothing.

“So does that mean the mokuton is always a gift? How does Tenzo—my teacher—use the mokuton, then?”

It was not Hashirama who gave that power to your teacher. His body contained my power, but the mokuton draws its powers from me, not from bone and flesh. The white snake Orochimaru took your children into his caves, where my roots lived. He put Hashirama’s body into their bodies, and all died except one. Tenzo cried out for help, and my roots heard him. I saw in other worlds that his teachings would help you grow, even if he was not the one who would kill the sickness within me.

Sakura frowned. “But...I thought Hagoromo gave me the mokuton.”

Many years ago, Hagoromo became a part of me. During his life, he saw me as an enemy, because Kaguya had infected me. He believed that my will and hers could not be separated, and he tried to kill me. Sometimes, he succeeded—those bits of me are cut off from the rest, dead or dying. I can no longer reach those worlds. In your world, Hagoromo did not succeed. Kaguya lived, and he died, becoming a part of me. But I spoke to him, and he saw the truth: I want only to live, and for the earth to prosper, for if the earth is healthy, then I am healthy. I showed him all of the other humans I had blessed with the mokuton, and how each of them failed. Then Hagoromo told me that there was one human he had overlooked, someone he thought could wield the mokuton to protect me and protect the world.

We worked together, and found you.

“He did say he looked backwards and forwards in time...but if that’s true, then hasn’t this already happened?”

Yes, and no. Time and space are simple for me; like water and air is to other trees, time and space nourish me. But my ability to change the future is limited. That is why Hagoromo helped me. He knew that if he helped me find the one who could kill Kaguya and keep me alive, every world I touched would prosper. And he knew that killing me would kill the earth. If I was young, that would not be the case. But here, I am old. My roots are too deep, and your planet’s chakra so dependent on me, that my death would destroy it. I have seen it happen before. It took months, or years, or centuries, but gradually those worlds wasted away.

“So killing Kaguya was never enough. We need to kill her *and* save you.”

Precisely. My primary rhizome is not far from here. My Echo will take you there, and your friends as well. You and the other one will break the seal, and Kaguya will emerge from her nest. The Uchiha’s black fire is needed to kill her for good. We did not expect him this time; in all other worlds the fire was too wild and killed me. Here, the black fire listens. So I chose him, but not to bear my power. That was for you. If you do this properly, then we all will live and grow and make more of ourselves.

Of course, that left one major question. Out of all the worlds, out of all the possibilities, out of all the potential candidates...

“Why me? Couldn’t someone else have done this? Someone more powerful to begin with?”

Yes. They could have. But they did not. I have given the mokuton to

humans far more powerful than you, hoping that they could save me. None of them succeeded. But you might.

“Will I?”

Let's find out. What was it that one human always said...? Hold onto your butt.

The ground shifted and strained. Off in the distance, another pack of wandering Zetsu clones alerted to the sound of the earth tearing itself asunder, but it was too late to run away; roots bubbled out of the ground like water set to boil and tore the clones to pieces. There was not even enough time for them to scream.

A brief silence ensued, in which Itachi and his new comrades gaped, stunned, at the resulting carnage. They'd all seen death before. But humans killing other humans was personal, even if the killer had never met the victim. There was a mutual understanding of pain and the consequences of murderous intent. Killing was emotional, even for those who loved doing it. Dying humbled. The way the roots had moved, though, had seemed almost cold and calculating—detached from the very notion of awareness of the self; like a venus fly trap closing around a bug, there was no malice. There was only the terrible, terrible waiting.

The ground shifted again, this time right underneath Itachi's feet. More roots yanked themselves free of the soil, coming together to form an arch-like structure. A void of pure nothingness—at least, that was what the Mangekyo perceived—filled the arch like an arcane door. From out of the void stepped Sakura, Echo on her shoulder, every inch of exposed skin covered in shimmering, fractal lines—not the severe, angular markings of the Byakugou, but something more natural, lifelike: roots. Itachi touched her hand. It was warm like the

rest of her, but there was a calm fortitude that had been missing all the times before. In her eyes, Itachi still saw the fury Sakura wielded like a warrior queen—but there was also an unshakable confidence.

Echo hopped to the ground, and swelled to the size of a house. No one commented on this. It had been a very long day.

“I know how to get to Kaguya,” Sakura said. “Let’s go.”

Sakura explained everything the god tree had told her on the way to their destination, shouting to be heard over the wind passing across Echo’s feathers. Everyone in the original group remained together; though Minato dearly wanted to return to Konoha and assess what, if any, effects the Tsukiyomi had had on its citizens. Regrettably, he found whenever he strayed too far from Itachi’s side that Obito’s genjutsu began clawing at his mind—too far away, and Itachi’s seal might fail. For now, they were all stuck together. Everything else would have to wait.

Sakura took the time to conduct a self-exam via chakra, taking stock of the changes her body made in response to the god tree’s promised sage mode. Naruto had always described toad sage mode as an exercise in frustration, akin to keeping one’s grip on a slippery bar of soap. Hold it too loosely, and it fell. Hold it too tightly, and it shot out of your hands. Mokuton sage mode felt like nothing of the sort. The only thing Sakura knew to compare it to was the time she’d almost turned into a tree. That euphoria and the intoxicating sensation of being everywhere and seeing everything was present. What was missing was the subjugation; the mokuton bloomed within her, but did not overtake her. It simply gathered all of its strength up within her and waited for a suggestion to let loose.

Echo flew northeast towards the Valley of the End, where the land

began its slow transition from deciduous forests to the dry plateaus that eventually became mountains in the Land of Lightning.

Echo began circling over the highest plateau: a desiccated place where glaciers once grew that towered over the surrounding landscape. Once, magnificent waterfalls had fed the rivers below—the evidence for their existence was carved into the land itself. Now, only hardy plants and vultures lived here, with the occasional adamant herd of mountain goats. The light from the red moon was strongest here, and bathed the landscape in foreboding scarlet.

Their destination was obvious from this height: the earth had been disturbed at the very center of the plateau, as though a colossal hand had dug up the ground, planted the seed, and then covered it again, taking care to pat the dirt down once they were finished. It was almost like a grave.

Echo let out an alarm call. Here, packs of Zetsu clones were thick, but Itachi's eye told them that these were in worse shape than the packs they'd seen closer to the Senju Forest, in a way that suggested their production had been rushed. A few experimental long-range attacks provided additional information regarding both the clones' behavior and their sturdiness: erratic and low, respectively.

Minato stood, keeping his balance with chakra-laden feet; he peered at the scene below and removed a three-pronged kunai from his pouch. "How long will these seals hold up?"

"As long as I'm alive."

"Try not to die, then. With me, Team Minato."

"Sir!"

“Sir!”

“You said we could name the squad after me this time.”

“Sir!”

The ANBU made a human clover chain, each of them with one hand on the next with the captain left to place their hand on Minato’s back. Then Minato threw the kunai straight down—one second passed, two, three, and then they popped out of sight with a thundering crack. That left Sakura, Itachi, and Kosuke on Echo’s back.

“I’m heading down,” Kosuke announced. With a jump, they, too, fell out of sight.

And then there were two. Sakura grabbed Itachi by the ears and kissed him with all her might. In her heightened state, every living thing around her sang with chakra; this close to Itachi, Sakura felt his existence in a very literal way, from the steady beat of his heart to the quick, impatient flow of his fire-natured chakra.

“I’m going to expose the seal and weaken it,” she said. “But I can’t break it by myself. The god tree said you had something that would help.”

Itachi held up his sword. It burst into black flames.

“God, that’s so cool. Okay, let’s figure out the best way to get down there. Solve the Zetsu problem, and then deal with everything else.”

A whistle was all the warning they had for the shard of wood that shot up from the ground like a cannon blast, growing louder and more shrill the faster it flew. Echo banked, but not soon enough; the projectile caught her in the left wing, tearing through the flesh with a *snap* of broken bone. She fell, Itachi and Sakura clinging desperately to her feathers as she spiraled down and down, regaining just enough control to land right side up. Toppling sideways, Echo lay next to a crumpled human figure: Obito. Alive. Barely.

Sakura scrambled off of Echo's back, sending just enough yin chakra into the bird's body to ensure her wound was not fatal. Obito was her next target. His Sharingan still colored the moon, but a partial Infinite Tsukiyomi didn't sound like the sort of thing meant to last beyond convenience's sake. Halfway there, Sakura fell backward with a gasp as Itachi caught her by the arm and yanked her close. Another shard of wood, this one longer than a fence post, embedded itself into the stoney earth, sending up a shockwave that nearly knocked both of them off their feet.

Sakura spun around to see Black Zetsu standing on top of the soil concealing the god tree's rhizome, his arm still raised from his attack; a third shard of wood, hovering behind him, disintegrated and became one with his body once more. On the edges of the plateau, Sakura glimpsed Minato, the ANBU, and Kosuke going to town on the white clones, keeping them from invading the top.

"You're not going to defeat her," Black Zetsu said, addressing Sakura directly in a way the white one never had. "I know about the others now. I know that you are not from this world. I know that the tree has longed for its release from my mother's people. But it, like you, fails to understand one simple fact: that there are some creatures destined to serve others at any cost. There are people who are meant to feed, and people who are meant to be fed upon. So it has always been, and so it will be. Your existence is not pointless. But the life that you live does not reflect your true purpose. It is no wonder you aren't happy. You fight against the biological order of things, when you ought to submit to it."

Sakura scowled. “Man, shut *up* with that shit,” she said. “If all you’ve got going for you is insults, then I regret to inform you that I have developed a reasonable amount of self-esteem. Get fucked.”

Sakura took out a heavy bag of mixed seeds from her pocket and hurled them at Zetsu’s face. He dodged, of course, but she’d had no intention of hitting him in the first place. The bag smacked into the ground, triggering the miniature explosive inside and scattering the seeds in a circle fifty meters across. With the slightest push, every seed burst to life. Roots tunneled down and stems leapt skyward at breakneck speed. A few of the plants had specific jobs—those sought out Echo and Obito, shielding their bodies and providing Sakura a chakra-based connection to monitor their vitals. It didn’t tire Sakura one bit. If anything, the higher the forest grew, the more energetic she felt; these plants, all hardy to the landscape and conveniently native, loved to live and grow. They did both with gusto.

Zetsu slipped under the topsoil, but not for long. A tattling hazelnut tree alerted Sakura to Zetsu’s presence, and she sent new growth speeding after him; he was forced aboveground, held immobile by a tangle of roots.

“You can’t hide from me anymore,” Sakura said. “I won’t let you get away. This is where you die.”

“You will not defeat her.” There was no fear in Black Zetsu’s eyes. Sakura wondered if it was even possible for him to fear—a corrupted, infected offshoot of the god tree, given a body for Kaguya’s will to spread beyond the limitations of her prison. “I know that you can release her. But you will not defeat her. Her people were the first to travel between worlds. Do you think she is ignorant of your presence here? I have told her everything. Kill me if you want, but you cannot defeat one who has defeated time itself.”

Sakura flexed her arms. Thick, angry spikes grew out of the roots, sinking deep into Zetsu's skin, the poison within them dissolving his flesh: a prison not unlike the one Itachi had been trapped in all those years ago.

"I'd make a pun about weeding the garden or something," she quipped. "But I think it might go over your head."

The roots undulated, sinking the thorns even deeper. Slowly, Zetsu began to dissolve. He didn't scream or thrash, but accepted his fate with the gravity of one who knew he had no chance of survival. His existence depended just as much on the god tree as it did on Kaguya's will. But Kaguya was still sealed away; the god tree wasn't and had given Sakura every bit of its strength her body could handle. Overpowering Zetsu was easy. He watched Sakura with his strange, yellow eyes, growing smaller and smaller as the poison broke down his cells until he became little more than a pile of plant matter, indistinguishable from any other.

"Burn him," Sakura said. Itachi called the black flames; they did their job delicately, keeping the damage strictly confined to the remains. Beneath the spot where Zetsu had been, the plants weren't even the slightest bit singed. Green and vibrant, they lived on.

And then it was done—that part, anyway. The battle with Kaguya was still to come, and Sakura knew that would be no easy feat, mokuton sage or no mokuton sage, Amaterasu or no Amaterasu. They were about to face off against the mother of all shinobi, and even if their combined power somehow equaled Kaguya's, she had them both beat in breadth of skill. But first, there were other things to take care of. Sakura held her breath until the last lingering bits of Black Zetsu faded into nothing, and then she set off for Echo and Obito at a sprint.

If he were ever asked to describe the one thing he admired most about Sakura, Itachi knew he would recall with perfect clarity the scene before him: his wife, fresh from effortlessly killing one of humanity's greatest threats, not stopping to revel in the glory of her conquest but scrambling like mad for the sidelines, her hands glowing with the promise of life. Where others would bask in their accomplishments, Sakura had simply checked Kill Apocalypse Enabler off of her list so she could get to the real task at hand: healing what had been broken.

She stopped just short of touching Obito's body, allowing her chakra to jump the gap and connect her body to his.

"Safer this way," was her muttered explanation. "I won't touch him until I know nothing's—oh—"

Obito coughed—it was a wet sound, and rumbled deep in Obito's chest. Itachi didn't have to be a combat medic to know what it meant. He'd heard that sound many times before. It told a story that only had one ending.

"Bird—is the bird okay?" Obito grabbed Sakura with a trembling hand. His single Mangekyo spun sluggishly.

"She'll be fine. She won't be flying for a while, but she's fine."

"Good," Obito said. "Good," he repeated, weaker.

"Obito—"

He held up a hand. "Don't," he said. "I know I'm dying. You don't need to feel responsible for it. My life was always going to end this

way, from the moment that seal was written on my skin. There's nothing you can do. The Tsukiyomi will burn through my chakra until there's nothing left, and then the seal will kill me. Just like it was always meant to."

"I just thought..." Sakura sniffed, and wiped off her face with a nearby fern. "I thought we'd save everyone. I thought everything would just... I don't know, work out. That nobody would have to get hurt but us. How can you save the world if you can't save all the people living in it?"

"The world is bigger than we know. You know, too. You've seen it, just like I did. I'm just one small part of many worlds."

"So am I."

The battle was not over. Kosuke and Minato's team kept up their relentless attacks beyond the barriers of Sakura's forest. Muffled thuds, screams, and flashes of light poked through the green now and again, but for the most part, the fighting had a muted quality to it, as though heard through a closed window. Obito paused to take a few more rattling breaths. Sakura moved her hands to his collar, opening the shirt to reveal the angry red lines Zetsu had carved into the skin: the same curious design, and the same curious script. An ancient script for an ancient tongue.

Obito's eye found Itachi's face. Itachi wanted to look away, but found he couldn't.

"Itachi...my Itachi...he would've wanted me to help you. I hope he's out there, somewhere—my Itachi. If the universe is as big as what I saw, and if there is some kindness among all the chaos, he *must* be. I don't resent your being here, Itachi. I hope you know that. I saw pieces of your life, when the tree brought you here. Little bits of

things. Your life was hard—so hard. Every day, you struggled. And you kept going. No matter what, you kept going.”

Itachi sat on the ground beside Sakura, and watched the rise and fall of Obito’s chest. Every breath came out shallow, labored.

“You’re almost there,” Obito said. He closed his eye and sighed. “Burn my body. And take my remains to my father and mother. Tell them I hope I made them proud. And take this. Please. I know it must seem trivial to you, but it’s important to me. Keep it somewhere safe.” Obito, hands shaking, pulled a folded-up piece of paper from some hidden pocket, and dropped it on the ground next to his head.

“I will return your body to the Clan, and to Amaterasu.” Itachi placed his hands over Sakura’s, still resting against the seal. “Everyone in the world will know what you did here.”

Obito gave Itachi a long, solemn look. And then he nodded. “She’s terrifying up close, the Rabbit Princess. I saw the other one. Looking into her eyes is like looking straight at the moon: cold, distant, powerful, immovable. But she’s no match for the sun. Even a total eclipse can’t take out the sun. Give her hell for me, would you?”

“We will,” said Sakura.

“Good,” Obito said, and died.

There was no final gasp, no unsightly twitching to remind all present that humans were as much meat as the next creature. Obito was, and then he wasn’t. The seal on his chest faded, so that it looked like a decades-old scar, and his body relaxed, sinking into its final repose. Overhead, the sky turned blue, the red tint blinking out like a light.

“It isn’t fair,” Sakura said. She picked up the piece of paper that Obito had dropped, and gently unfurled it; years of folding and refolding had made it brittle, but the interior was still visible. It was a child’s drawing, depicting a small, long-haired, black-eyed boy holding hands with a blindfolded man in a traveling cloak. ‘Friends’ was written in kanji on the ground beneath their feet.

“It isn’t—it isn’t *fair*, it’s—” Sakura’s breath hitched. She couldn’t cry again. She wouldn’t. She failed.

Itachi took the drawing from her, stowing it away in the seal where he kept the sword, and leaned against her shoulder, propping her up.

“I didn’t want people to die,” Sakura said. “I thought when we came here, that—that—what’s the point of being this strong if you can’t *save* everyone?”

“I know. I didn’t want this either.”

They sat like that for as long as they dared: just a minute or so, just long enough for them to catch their breath and for Echo to hop closer and rap against the ground with her beak, telling them to get a move on.

“We have to go.” Sakura wiped the tears from her face and stood. The ferns near Obito’s body curled over and around him.

“Where to?”

“The god tree says anywhere around here. I just have to call up the

seal, and this world's Kaguya will appear. It's sort of here-and-not-here, just like the god tree is."

Sakura parted the forest with a wave, and Itachi and Echo followed her through the gap. She came to a stop at a place that, to Itachi, looked identical to the rest of their surroundings. But when Sakura knelt down and sent a pulse of chakra through the forest floor, the whole area lit up for Itachi's Mangekyo like a bonfire. A seal appeared beneath their feet, arcs of light slicing through the vegetation until the network of lines closed itself. There were no less than ten concentric circles and endless tiny characters that filled every single gap all the way to the outermost boundary. In diameter, it measured nearly fifteen paces.

It glowed. Sakura stepped aside. "After you."

Itachi lifted the Sun Sword. Black flames danced along its edge, hungry but firmly under his control. "Get ready." He brought the sword down, and sliced the seal neatly in two. It was a little strange to watch; normally, seals broke like physical things: you could see the lines snap like a wire somebody had taken a pair of cutters to. This seal was nothing of the sort. It was whole, Itachi brought the sword down upon it, and it became two separate pieces that held their forms for several seconds as though the seal itself hadn't caught on to its own demise. Then, it imploded into a ball of black flame. Its collapse triggered the release of the chakra that had made it, and the energy escaped all at once, forming several pillars of light that shot out in all directions—some flew up and away, some passed through Itachi's body, leaving a tingly feeling in their wake. Others simply dissipated in the air.

There was silence, for the span of an inhale. On the exhale, there came a shockwave of new chakra, so large and so powerful that it could only have belonged to one person: Kaguya, teeth bared in anger, half-formed and wild, crawled out of a crack in the center of the seal like a creature leaving its burrow. She began to levitate, giving Itachi and Sakura time to study her. And she looked...terrible: skeletal, her hair hanging lank and limp around her body—a far cry from her perfect

form in the other world.

The Mangekyo whirled furiously. “She’s a shell of her true self in terms of chakra,” Itachi said. “The lack of tailed beasts and the ritual must have stripped her of her power.”

“Well, let’s take out the trash, then.”

“Hold on.” Itachi tugged at Sakura’s waistline right as she tensed in preparation for an assault. “Something isn’t right.” *An injured animal bites the hardest.*

Kaguya, who had been so cold and emotionless in the other world, began to laugh, and then to cry. Both were disturbing to witness: the mixture of rage, sorrow, and bitterness on Kaguya’s face made the hair on the back of Itachi’s neck stand up.

“I see you,” Kaguya said, her voice rattling as Obito’s had. “I *see* you. You think this is the end? You think that the god tree has blessed you—that *you* have won?”

“I think we’re getting there,” Sakura said. The forest enlarged, taking over the space around Kaguya, pinning her inside.

“There is no escape, girl. And there is no end. Even if you kill me, the other one is still looking for you. Even now, she is looking for you. The tree will only hold her off for so long. I may not have the strength to stop you, but I am not helpless. The universe is full of worlds, all of them corrupt, all of them useless, all filled with corrupt, useless people. There is no point in saving this world, or your last. Everything will die in the end. The only question is who will die first. It will be a blessing.”

Sakura and Itachi shared an alarmed look. The Sage had mentioned, almost offhand, the other Kaguya's encroachment on the space between worlds in which Itachi had been given his mission. As the battle turned on the Allied Forces and Kaguya gained ground, she had pounded on the walls until they cracked and Itachi watched, helpless, as the worst came to pass: his world, destroyed, and the other Kaguya still on the hunt, crashing through time and space to find them.

"I cannot stop you," Kaguya said. She lifted her arms, shaking like a dead leaf in the wind, and clasped her hands in a single sign: the hare. A sign for cunning, speed, the moon. "But the other one will. I am not angry with you—you are all my children, foolish that you are. You do not know what you do."

As one, Sakura and Itachi charged at Kaguya, Sakura pinning Kaguya down with vines while Itachi drew back the Sun Sword, burning with black fire. But they were moments too late: even as Sakura's poisons froze Kaguya's muscles in place, and even as Itachi plunged the sword into Kaguya's chest, a crack opened up before them. Inside, there was darkness, and beyond that, a mass of swirling galaxies. An unseen force snatched Itachi and Sakura up like a snare, pulling them in. The last thing Itachi saw was Kaguya's face, stricken with grief even as the fire ate her up. She burned into nothing. The crack mended itself. And then Itachi and Sakura were alone, clinging to one another in the infinite, empty space.

But not for long.

The darkness shuddered like a gong. Screams from a thousand Zetsu clones filled the empty space and white-hot fissures began to appear all around them. One of them broke open, and Kaguya—their Kaguya, a complete Kaguya—clawed her way through.

"You," she roared. "The tree is *mine*. You will not take it from me. You

will *not* take it from me. If I have to kill the entire tree and begin anew, then I will—this *world* is mine. I gave you *everything*, and you stole it from me!”

“Fuck,” Sakura said.

Kaguya charged. Itachi felt himself begin to panic. “Sakura. Reach for the god tree. Can you still feel it?”

“Oh, shit! Good idea.” Sakura shut her eyes tight. “Yes, it’s still there, it’s—oh wow, it’s fast. Watch out!”

Another crack opened up in the darkness, and from within its depths a large root materialized. It took Sakura and Itachi firmly by the waist and yanked them through.

“Hold on,” Sakura shouted. “It’s trying to get us away from—no, no—wrong place, *wrong place—!*”

“What?” Itachi said, and then everything went black.

Chapter End Notes

Sakura is allowed to be in god mode AND cry. Kicking ass does not mean turning into a cold, unfeeling badass. Sakura is a warm, intensely feeling badass.

Just think for a second, though, how scary something like this would be in real life. There are quite a few animals that have evolved alongside us and benefit from our presence. The honey guide, dogs, etc. But in all those situations, we are (or consider ourselves to be) the “dominant” or “higher” being in that circumstance. We are the ones with power, and our power is benefitting the animals, and we are in turn benefitted by them in some way. Now imagine if there was this giant sapient tree that

literally spans the cosmos and it has decided that YOU (yes, you) are a beneficial organism and it's just decided, on your behalf, that you are getting to know one another. Its mind is vast and unknowable to you. It could kill you in so many ways without even thinking. And it wants you to do X for it, and to inform you of this desire, it spends thousands of years learning how to communicate with you in some way. And one day it rips your soul out of the dimension you came from and forces it into another dimension because it understood on its level that this would somehow better its odds for survival. It tries to speak your language, a tad. You're just living your life and the god tree is like HEY COME OVER HERE IF YOU RUB ON ME I'LL GIVE YOU A KITCHENAID THAT'S WHAT YOU'RE INTO RIGHT and you're like oh shit yeah I want that and you go over there and rub on it and then it's like YEAH JUST LIKE THAT and maybe there's a KitchenAid and maybe there isn't. It doesn't give a shit about you. And that's not a bad thing. It doesn't understand you. That's not a bad thing either. It just wants you to do Thing for it. It isn't bad or good, ethical or moral. It just IS.

time to enter...the multiverse

Optional Comment Assignment:

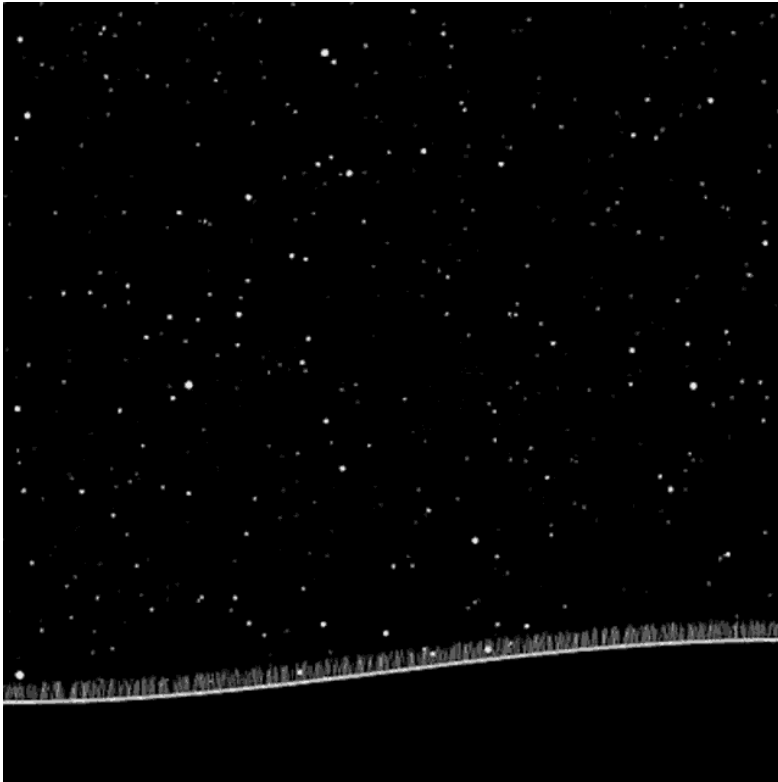
1. What incredibly embarrassing features would a tree evolve if it wanted YOU to pay attention to it? Would it sprout flowers shaped like [checks smudged writing on hand] Zeighn from One Direction? Would it play a haunting, ever-so-slightly off rendition of Megalovania? Develop knots in the shape of your favorite Bad Dragon product?

Or if I could have saved him with such tutelage

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, Sakura and Itachi save the multiverse

Chapter Notes



tw: violence and gore

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sakura sneezed. The angle of the sun always hit her right in the face at the start of her shift, and lingered there for a full twenty minutes past the hour. Twenty minutes of sneezing, while the manager folded

her arms and glared from the back office, as though Sakura had intentionally selected her genes in order to acquire a photic sneeze reflex. Lady Tsunade had always said—

Wait.

Who?

“I said, one cream and three sugars.”

Sakura blinked the sun out of her eyes. There was a man standing in front of the counter, wearing an argyle sweater and a pair of horn rimmed glasses. His long, black hair was pulled out of his face in a loose ponytail. Sakura knew him: Itachi Uchiha, military archivist, aspiring children’s book author. He came to the cafe she worked at every morning and ordered the same drink: French press medium roast, one cream, three sugars. He was always so polite to her, and incredibly handsome on top of that. It wouldn’t be appropriate to hit on a customer, of course, but damn if he didn’t make her want to break all the rules. He had an ass for days. And he had magic red eyes that could hypnotize people.

Wait.

What?

“Um,” Sakura said. “Can I—are you ordering coffee?”

“I...think so?” Itachi picked at his sweater. “Why am I wearing this?”

“Why *are* you wearing that?” Sakura turned to look at the endless line of pump bottles behind her. Marshmallow, cherry, margarita, cinnamon, *look out*, orange, *wake up*, green apple, *she’s almost here*, lemon—

Itachi put his hands on the counter and leaned in. “You’re Sakura Haruno, right?”

“Yes? Yes, I am.” She was sure of that, at least. Her hair itched. Reaching up to scratch it—her mother would’ve been ashamed—Sakura poked her finger against the end of a long pin keeping her bun in place. Tugging gently, she dislodged it, and looked at the object sitting in her palm: a long, golden pin with a bee on the end. Were those diamonds real? “What...?”

“I...think we’re married.” Itachi looked at his left hand, and frowned. No wedding ring. Well, Sakura thought, they’d talked about rings before. Neither of them particularly wanted one. They were dangerous in a fight since they could get caught on things.

In a fight. In a fight? That wasn’t right, was it? Sakura hadn’t fought anybody a day in her life.

“Are we married?” Sakura said. “To each other?”

Itachi shrugged. “I don’t know.”

There was an ornamental sweet potato vine peeking out over a cup next to the cash register. It shivered and strained towards Sakura’s arm. Were plants supposed to do that? Sakura sneezed again.

“Is there a problem here?” The manager marched out of the office, crowding Sakura up against the register. Her name tag read Tsunade Senju, just like it did every other day. “Ring the man up, Sakura. There’s a line.”

“Something isn’t right,” Sakura whispered.

“Something isn’t right,” Itachi agreed.

“You’re damn right there isn’t,” Tsunade the Manager said. “How do you expect to take this place over if you keep spacing out all the time? I apologize, Mr. Uchiha. We really appreciate your donations. We’d never have saved this place if it wasn’t for your help.”

Something. Wasn’t. Right.

But what wasn’t right? Everything *looked* fine. Then, the coffee shop flickered. Like a surrealist painting, objects and people began to distort and melt. The air splintered and cracked like dry grass.

Pick me up. Now.

Sakura grabbed the sweet potato vine by the cup.

The sword!

Sakura snatched a butter knife from the silverware baskets and thrust it into Itachi’s hands. He stared at it.

“We need these things,” she told Itachi.

Itachi shrugged a second time. “Okay. Sure.”

The splinters multiplied into fractals of broken light. A scream rang out from within. Not a human scream. Those things weren’t human, even if they had been once, poor bastards. A pale hand, thin fingers ending in blood-soaked claws, loomed over the coffee shop. None of the customers seemed to mind, or even see it. But Sakura and Itachi did. An avalanche of memories slammed into Sakura’s consciousness, ripping her mind in two—she was Sakura Haruno, and she didn’t come from here, even though Here felt as familiar as anything else. She could see the moment Itachi realized as well.

“It’s Kaguya!” Sakura smashed the cup on the ground. The vine thickened and grew like crazy, filling the coffee shop with leafy tendrils in a matter of seconds. “Fuck!”

“Language,” Tsunade the Manager admonished.

Itachi jumped onto the counter and brandished the butter knife, now coated in glowing, black cream cheese.

You have to stop her, the sweet potato vine said. Don’t let her dig deeper.

“Here you are.” Kaguya stepped forward out of the cracked air, her hair reaching for its prey in an almost leisurely fashion now that she believed Itachi and Sakura were trapped. A nearby customer fell to the ground into a pile of ash when he brushed against one of the bone-white strands.

“Shit.” Sakura tapped into the well of energy singing out from the sweet potato plant. The god tree—of course. It wouldn’t abandon her. The vines lunged towards the rift, wrapping around Kaguya’s arms and stopping her in her tracks—for now. Kaguya looked down, blank faced.

“Why do you struggle?” Her face conveyed an intense confusion. Not arrogance. “There is no point. Look at all of these worlds—this place is poisoned by your presence. They were happy before you corrupted them.” Kaguya gestured to the coffee house with the tip of her chin. “This is why humanity must be controlled. Whenever one of you tries to reach beyond your place, you soil everything you touch. But your trials will be in vain. Your efforts are meaningless on the grand stage of the universe. Humanity’s destiny is to serve me: their protector, their chakra-mother.”

Sakura ignored her. Debating or interrogating Kaguya would lead them nowhere. It was time to drive the invader out. “Itachi, get her arm!”

Itachi was already there. The butter knife tore through Kaguya’s arm with barely any effort, severing the burning limb and sending it crashing to the floor. With a strangled shriek, Kaguya tugged against the vines, but they held her tight.

Kaguya’s empty expression twisted in rage. “How *dare* you,” she howled. Straining to move, she grasped at her arm, both her hand and the stump growing with chakra. But the limb did not regrow. “No,” she said. “That isn’t right.” The vines tightened their grip, and Kaguya began to struggle like a creature caught in a net. “This is *my* chakra; those are *my* flames!”

Then, all at once, the struggles ceased. Kaguya leaned backward, her body disappearing into the void save for the arm. The rift slammed

shut on Kaguya's stump, just above where the fire had spread. The limb, lying in a pile of blood, kept burning until it disappeared.

"Huh," Professor Kakashi said. He was standing at the sugar counter, stuffing handfuls of raw sugar packets into his tweed jacket. "That's new."

She was hunting, the sweet potato vine said. Now she is running. She knows you may be her match. Chase her down, ensnare her, kill her. And then we will all be free. I am happy, so happy. Ecstatic. Never been happier.

Another rift opened up in the ceiling. Itachi pulled Sakura up onto the counter, just in time for the god tree's root to spirit them away.

"That was fucking weird," Sakura said. The root had them in a single grasp this time, squishing them together like sardines in a tin.

"You look good in a French maid outfit," Itachi said.

"You look good in a giant sweater. What the hell is French?"

"I have no idea."

*There she is. Get ready. Kill her, **kill her, KILL HER.***

Sakura flexed her arms. Itachi gripped the Sun Sword, presently in its normal state.

“Let’s do this.”

The blacklights lit up the dark in splashes of fluorescent neon: body paint, glowing drinks, glowing clothing. Itachi blinked the stars out of his eyes and searched for Sakura, his mind clear of the sluggish fog that had drug him down in the coffeeshop. Somewhere in this room, Sakura was waking up as well, but without making contact with her, Itachi had no idea what state she was in. Itachi reached for his sword and came back up with a row of black olives caught in a bamboo skewer.

“Itachi?”

Itachi turned around—or tried to, anyway. He was, he now realized, straddling someone, his back to their front. And he was, he subsequently realized, wearing very little clothing.

“Itachi, are you a *stripper*?” Thankfully, it was Sakura he was straddling and not a stranger. She gawked at his lack of attire. Glitter paint lit up the contours of his body, reflecting off of the glass tabletop.

“I think this is the sword.” Itachi held up the skewer. “My eyes are up here,” he added.

“Oh my god, am I wearing a pantsuit?” Indeed she was. Sakura grabbed a handful of green leaves and buds from the middle of a table. “Somebody was seriously in here trying to smoke raw cannabis,” she said. “It better not have been me. Even a me that wears pantsuits should know better.” The cannabis leaves pulsed, and began

to multiply, growing stems and roots that clung to the walls and floor.

She's here—somewhere to your left.

Itachi spotted a figure, bowed over, attempting to claw its way through the wall. Another rift opened. The people in the club began to scream when Kaguya swiped at a dancer, catching her hair in the process and transforming it to ash. Itachi was there half a second later, cutting the hair close just before the bone ash reached the skin. Sakura threw a pocketful of bills and a diamond-studded wrist watch into the stunned dancer's lap.

"Sorry," she said. "This probably won't happen again."

"No, no! You will *not* take this world from me!" Kaguya screamed; Itachi's flaming skewer caught her in the ankle, burning off her leg to the thigh before she shut the rift again.

They were ready for the roots this time, and jumped on before they got grabbed.

A university came into view—quaint brick buildings tucked between maple trees. Itachi's boat shoes pounded the cobblestone sidewalk as he leapt at the white-haired woman, sporting tight pastel shorts and an inkpen dripping black ink. Sakura was right behind, wearing a lacrosse uniform and carrying a mutating air plant affixed to a refrigerator magnet.

The students watched in awe as the air plant lashed out at the bleeding, shrieking woman whose hair had begun to fall out in

clumps. The man threw the pen like a javelin, and it landed deep in Kaguya's upper arm. Ink spread to her chest.

"No, no!" She cried. "You will die! You will all die! What is it all for, if you will die? Even if you kill me, a million others haven't. I will kill you again and again!"

"I don't think so." The woman in sportswear pinned the bleeding woman to the ground. "Once we save this part of the god tree, we can save the others. Your death will spread. It's all about getting a dimensional foot in the door. And if this is all so pointless, why don't *you* lay down and die, you mangey bitch?"

The bleeding woman dug a hole in the earth, and climbed down into it. The air fractured like a broken window.

"Stay in school, everybody," the varsity-jersey-woman said. Her companion raised a fist to the sky in agreement. Then an enormous tree root erupted from the soil, and carried them both away.

A bloody row raged between Uchiha and Senju—Hashirama and Madara clashed above, their younger brothers clashed below. Izuna lay beneath Tobirama, bleeding out. Everyone froze in place when Itachi and Sakura landed right in the middle of things, but only for a second; these were warriors hardened by a thousand life-or-death battles, and they had no time to question mysterious, otherworldly interlopers.

"Who the hell are you?" Madara said. Itachi looked directly in his eyes, his Mangekyo whirling, and drew the Sun Sword. Amaterasu's black flames danced along its length. Madara actually took a step *back*.

“Susanoo?” Madara questioned.

“N—”

Sakura waved her arms. “Yes! Yes, he is!” All around the battlefield, the plants began to sway drunkenly and grow at astounding speeds. “Release!” Sakura activated her Byakugou, and the black lines of the seal wrapped around her body, nestling in with the lines left by the mokuton sage mode. Izuna rose to his hands and knees, and then stood, touching the part of his belly no longer torn open by Tobirama’s sword. Others began to rise as well, and those still standing touched their newly healed skin.

“What do you want?” Izuna gazed upon them with open wonder. A few of the men fell to their knees and bowed.

“Here’s a short list,” Sakura whipped her head around, trying to find a rift. Was Kaguya already here, or—? The chances of a Kaguya existing here were high; they needed to flush her out as quickly as possible. “Uh, um...okay—shit—Lord Hashirama, you need to go find that tree in the middle of the Senju Forest and talk to it. Don’t try and tell it what to do. Just do what it says.”

“Excuse me? How do you know—?”

“They’re *gods*, brother,” Tobirama snapped.

Itachi cleared his throat. “Yes, and I have a message for the Uchiha. Destroy the tablet. It is a fake. The path to the Sharingan is through love, not hatred. Do not seek pain and death for power you can attain through compassion.”

“Yeah. Do *not* trust a guy named Zetsu. And—oh wait, hold on—” Hit with a flash of inspiration, Sakura reached into her weapons pouch and pulled out her journal. In it, she knew, the Senju and Uchiha would find the answers to the really important things—Zetsu’s origins, the history of the Rabbit Princess, notes on Itachi’s Sharingan progression, the secret behind the mokuton, and, unfortunately, quite a few graphic accounts of her and Itachi’s sex life. But hopefully they’d just ignore that bit for the history books.

She threw it at Madara’s head. He caught it without looking.

A spark of chakra and a ripple in time caught Itachi’s eye. “There she is.” Itachi ignited the earth surrounding Kaguya’s broken body, the black flames racing inward to trap her. He went after her, but Tobirama beat him to it, and impaled Kaguya in the stomach with his sword. Unfortunately, her finger found purchase in his calf, but Sakura jumped into action, amputating Tobirama’s leg from the knee down and cauterizing it in one swift motion.

“No, *no!*” Kaguya’s rage was unstoppable. With a sickening crunch, she tore her upper body from the lower half, leaving her stomach and legs behind. The rest crawled into a newly opened rift like a bug, trailing blood and viscera into the beyond.

“There’s one in this world, too,” Sakura said. “Break the seal and kill her. Let the god tree live. The tree will tell you all what to do, Lord Senju.”

Hashirama just nodded. The shock hadn’t worn off yet; he looked high as shit. Madara opened the journal. Thankfully, the first page he saw was not the sketch of a naked Itachi dozing on Sakura’s sunroom couch, but the bookmarked segment: a complete medical diagram of Itachi’s Sharingan. Sakura had mapped out its chakra pathways one day; they’d wanted to establish a baseline to determine if his

Mangekyo, whenever he acquired it, would be different on the back end compared to a Mangekyo that had been won in a bloodier, more traditional manner. It was that page Madara held up for Sakura to see.

“This is highly sensitive information,” Madara said. “And who are you, exactly? Susanoo’s messenger?”

“I’m a rabbit catcher. Sort of a hunter-gatherer combo. And I’m...a Forest Sage.” Yes—she rather liked the sound of that. Sakura couldn’t hide her giddy laugh. Itachi grabbed her by the waist, already halfway through the second rift, up and into the arms of the god tree. “Name the hidden village after me!”

Perhaps Kaguya planned it. Perhaps she didn’t. But it was fitting to end things here: in the battlefield where the world—their world, their *first* world—had ended. The white Zetsu clones boiled like water against the mottled landscape. To her left, Sakura saw the towering god tree, already beginning to wither now that Kaguya was reborn. To her right, Sakura saw what she feared most: Naruto, Sasuke, Kakashi-sensei. All dead. To her, years had passed since she’d been killed and taken from this world. To her friends and allies, perhaps only minutes had gone by.

Dead ahead lay Kaguya. Split in half. Bleeding out. Trying in vain to heal her wounds. But the mokuton and its steady stream of life energy capable of healing the most catastrophic of injuries no longer did her bidding.

“This is the end of the line for you,” Sakura said. She wanted to be a stone cold badass and punch the bitch right between the eyes, bone-ash-whatever be damned, but with innumerable timelines and dimensions at stake, this was a time for caution. Sakura called for the god tree. And it answered in spectacular fashion: the roots that had

followed them back into this world met their dying counterparts, splicing together and immediately showing signs of life. The god tree was reborn. As it grew, the white cocoons trapping the Allied Forces began to unfurl. All around them, people dropped to the ground and began, slowly, to awaken.

“You were not meant for glory. In a thousand other worlds, I have killed you like a bug.” Kaguya’s chest heaved, her lungs fighting to keep her breathing. Blood poured out of Kaguya’s mouth like a flash flood: frothing, dangerous. But contained.

“Not in this one,” Sakura said.

She took Itachi by the hand, and beckoned for the god tree. A small, unassuming tree trunk, soft with new growth, sprouted up around Kaguya, forming around her body, growing in and around her, soaking up the blood. Sakura squeezed Itachi’s hand, and he stepped forward, plunging the Sun Sword through Kaguya’s head, right through the Rinne Sharingan. The light faded from her eyes and her flesh turned gray. Amaterasu’s flames made quick work of her but did not damage the tree. The flames spread, covering the battlefield, burning through the white Zetsu clones and the cocoon wrappings but leaving the humans untouched. Some of them reached out and touched the flames, enchanted by the way they danced upon their hands and extinguished without a trace of pain.

“It’s over,” Itachi said.

“Now what?”

“Maybe we get to decide that, for once. Here’s hoping.”

The god tree reached down with one of its massive limbs, and offered

two small twigs. Sakura took one, and Itachi took the other, and they were lifted up to the heavens—into history, into legend, into a world of stars and light.

Sakura walked the pitch-black void, following a path just barely visible in the inky blackness. The path rippled like water, though there was no wetness to it; each step Sakura took lit up the darkness like a flashlight, as the ripples made by her footsteps exposed flashing images beneath the surface. She saw the battlefield that she had just left, and watched as the Allied Forces began piecing themselves together out of the rubble. Old enemies helped one another move rubble, and old friends clutched one another, crying.

In front of the god tree sapling that had held Kaguya, two bodies lay side by side: Sakura's and Itachi's, hand in hand, laid out so gently that they looked asleep. Gradually, the Allied Forces encircled them. Some of the first cocoon escapees pointed at the bodies and began to tell stories of what they had seen. The ripples bounced off of one another, spreading out and revealing new scenes that multiplied and grew: a memorial in Ame, a formal apology from the Senju for the events leading up to the Uchiha Incident, everyone moving on, borders shifting as the world adjusted to its new state. Things weren't perfect. War would rear its ugly head again, one day. For now, things were quiet.

Not too bad, the god tree said.

It scooped her up, and Sakura saw the whole of the god tree once again, standing before its impossibly massive form that grew in and out of countless worlds. Now that she'd had some practical experience, Sakura began to see order among the chaos: primary roots represented changes further back in time, which led into lateral roots, secondary and tertiary roots, and tiny root hairs at the very end. All the time, the roots were growing and changing, branching off, and dying. Some sections were quite volatile, while others were virtually

unchanging from her limited perspective. Generally, things in one area were similar to everything around them, but not always.

Their influence had been the most direct in those four worlds, but as Sakura watched, the ripples of her existence began to spread along the roots of the tree, jumping into other clusters, killing other Kaguyas. One by one, the Kaguyas were snuffed out, until the only ones left lived in the old, dead bits of the tree that had been cut off from the rest. Sakura watched the consequences of her actions play out like cosmic television, fascinated by the sublime messes that she had made in other people's worlds.

The coffeeshop, full of police tape and forensic detectives scratching their heads—

Tsunade the Manager wound up selling her coffee shop and getting back into paranormal biology. Professor Hatake couldn't forget that fateful day, and stayed up late at night researching reports of temporal disturbances. At first, but for the bizarre occurrences in that little coffee shop, nothing else seemed to change. But one day, the eternal empress up and died, freeing the citizens of her empire from her clutches. And Kakashi wondered, for the rest of his life, what other travesties his world might have suffered had the strange visitors passed it on by.

The strip club, which had become a co-op after the now-bald dancer invested her money and bought the place—

The hair—or lack thereof—had been such a hit, and the wind on her scalp felt so free, that Hinata never wanted to go back. She always wondered about the strange benefactors who'd changed her life forever, but between the steady income from dancing, the ticket proceeds from all the unexplained phenomenon chasers, and the sudden and unexplained death of the local slumlord, she had little to concern herself with.

The university, beset by questions it had no answers for—

In the biggest lecture hall, a scientific demonstration intending to prove that other dimensions did *not* exist did, in fact, prove that other dimensions existed. The funding for the new College of Everything was raised overnight. No one could agree on the architectural style for the building, though, so they got a concrete box with ten windows and no cell signal as compromise. Unimaginably petty academic violence ensued. The university president, the one obsessed with rabbits, vanished overnight with millions of dollars in cash. She turned up dead on a beach in Borneo, and most people shrugged it off as yet another weird happenstance. Shikamaru couldn't stop connecting the dots, though, and after countless sleepless nights in the lab, completed a device that he believed would provide him with the answers he so desperately sought. He wrote a letter to his family, turned on the machine, and stepped into another world.

Sakuragakure, the crown jewel of the Land of Fire, flourishing—a place of science, industry, ethically-acquired bloodline limits, statues depicting decapitated rabbit goddesses, and wholesome sex-positivity

Visitors to the Great Itachi Library enjoyed high tea on the roof, featuring citrus and cardamom ricotta cake, tea blends from the Land of Honey, and every flavor of dango imaginable. The Journal was under lock and key at all times, naturally, and only the most trusted of scholars got their hands on the real thing. One of several replicas (with certain sensitive information redacted) sat in a display case on the ground floor, turned to a different set of pages each day. Today's pages featured several sketches of the same penis from different angles. These were part of a six-page series scholars affectionately referred to as The Penis Period. Scholarly claims as to its true meaning were met with thrown office chairs more often than friendly debate.

“Why is *that* what they focused on? They're kind of obsessed with cocks,” said Sakura, a person who'd covered six pages of her journal in

nothing but cock art.

I do not claim to understand human society. Human biology is enough of a hassle as it is. Are you pleased? We have worked together so well. I am pleased. We should keep working together. I will give you many things.

“Could I have a request?”

Yes. What do you want?

“I want to go home.”

There was nothing special about this particular dock in Konoha, but for the way it had featured in several critical moments of Itachi’s personal history. Itachi performed his first successful Great Fireball on this dock. A childhood crush confessed to him on that plank right there. He’d lost track of how many lunches he’d shared with Sasuke, leaning up against the tie-down posts. Some memories were more painful: after killing all of his relatives, Itachi stood on this dock and looked at the sky above Konoha one more time—just one more time—before fleeing to join the Akatsuki.

Twilight lit up the dock in oranges, yellows, and reds, making the water so dark by comparison. The air stood still—still like death, but like the pause before the first breath, too. Overhead, all the wrong things filled up the sky—unfamiliar stars, three moons, and a whole galaxy, slowly spinning. This was not a real place. Or it was the realest place Itachi had ever been in. One of the two.

“Do you believe in life after death?”

There was another Itachi sitting next to him on the dock: the *Other* Itachi. The one whose place Itachi stole when the god tree dumped him on his ass in a strange world. Itachi looked his doppelgänger up and down. He could see Other Itachi had enjoyed a softer upbringing. On his final day in his world, he'd been on his way to engagement with a softer Sakura who loved him very much. And then, nothing. Everything gone. Itachi had stolen it all away.

After the killing of Kaguya, the god tree asked Itachi, in the dark, watery place between worlds, what he wanted. Sakura had done much of the heavy lifting, the tree was happy to inform him, but he'd played a critical role in her success; he was the drone to her worker bee. Hopefully she wouldn't kick him out of the house come winter so that he could die and save her some resources.

Itachi replied to his Other. "I'm not sure. After everything I've seen, I could believe almost anything. Maybe the truth is that I don't care anymore. Not in a pessimistic way—I don't think."

"Ah." Other Itachi leaned back on the slats of the dock, hands clasped over his stomach. Two of the moons slipped closer together, their heavenly trajectories on an explosive collision course. "Do you want to know where I went?"

"I think I ought to be told, yes," said Itachi.

"Because you feel guilty for replacing me."

"Yes."

Other Itachi reached out to him, resting a hand on Itachi's lower back.

“It isn’t your fault.”

“Then yes, I want to know. Not to feel sorry for myself. Or for you; I know there isn’t any point to it. But I figured I owed you some answers, and I hoped to get some from you in return.” Itachi paused. “The Sage told me that you could find another place and go there, if you wanted. You don’t have to stay where you are.”

Itachi joined his Other, watching the sky on his back.

“It was something closer to yours, I think,” Other Itachi said. “The Itachi I replaced killed his family. He ran. He killed that guy he thought was Madara, though. Went crazy, I guess. Became head of the Akatsuki. He brought peace to the world, but at horrific cost. You don’t want to know all the details.”

“I see.”

“I felt sorry for him. The way people treated me...it was like no one was ever really seeing him. They were worshipers, judges, acolytes. Nobody ever saw *him*. He killed his Kaguya. But he killed himself long before that.”

“Oh.” Itachi did not close his eyes, though he dearly wanted to. The moons were almost touching, now.

“He was so unstable that no one actually questioned the change in behavior. So I made sure that things were in order, told my second I was taking a short trip, and never went back. I traveled to another continent. It took some time to get there. The geography at the far western edge of our continent makes travel quite perilous, but I managed. I settled down after finding a village that had no idea who I was and appreciated my help, and found my own peace. I married

someone. His name is Asad.”

“You married a man?”

“We’re bisexual. Tell me you know that.” Other Itachi gave him an exasperated look.

“Of course I know that. I just never thought I’d do anything about it. The heir makes more heirs. I figured if someone in my family was going to follow their sexual dreams, it’d be Sasuke, but I don’t think your Sasuke is interested in that sort of thing. Maybe mine wasn’t, either.”

“Perhaps.”

They sat for a while, lost in their respective thoughts.

“There’s something you ought to have,” Itachi said. Before he could change his mind, he summoned the drawing from the seal on his wrist, and passed it to Other Itachi. The man accepted it with great reverence, his expression shifting to a grim smile as he realized what he held.

“Will the tree let you take it with you?”

“I think so,” Other Itachi said, and the broad, flat line of his mouth turned up ever so slightly at both ends. “Thank you.”

“I’m sorry we couldn’t save him. He’s the reason all of us are still

here.”

Other Itachi studied Itachi closely. His expression was fond—the way a person looked at someone they loved.

“Do you regret where you are now?” Other Itachi said.

“Not anymore. What about you? Was it all worth it?”

Other Itachi gave no answer, and pointed towards the heavens. The two moons collided with a deep thud; molten rock lit up the place where they connected and spread out across buckling, ever-deepening canyons.

“That’s our cue,” Other Itachi said. “Time’s up.”

“But I’m not finished talking to you,” Itachi said. “There’s so much more I wanted to ask.”

Other Itachi smiled at him. “Sorry, Itachi.” He reached out and tapped Itachi on the forehead, two fingers side by side. “Maybe another time.”

Sasuke and Naruto caught Sakura in outstretched arms. It would’ve been sweet, or even romantic, but it wasn’t the sort of slow-motion catch that made moviegoers catch their breath in the theater. It was more like the god tree had misjudged the distance and plopped Sakura into the Wherever-this-Was Dimension fifty feet above the ground,

and the two boys waiting below had to scramble to catch her disoriented ass.

“Sorry, sorry.” Sakura struggled to a standing position, clearing her throat and straightening Naruto and Sasuke’s clothes without even thinking.

“It’s cool, Sakura-chan.” Naruto ruffled Sakura’s hair, completely destroying the perfectly preened bun. She let it go. This time. He *was* dead, after all. “So a tree said we could talk to you or something.”

“We’re dead, idiot.” Sasuke whacked Naruto on the back of the head. “This is the only time she’ll be able to talk to us before we finish kicking the bucket.”

“Oh, fuck. I forgot we died.”

“Of course you did.”

Sakura laughed. And she pulled her boys in close, relishing in the smell of weapon oil (Sasuke) and cheap cologne (Naruto) and the way they put their arms around her without the slightest hint of hesitation. There was no room in the Whatever Dimension for hangups.

“Sakura-chan,” Naruto said. “That was the most badass, epic takedown I have *ever* seen. We didn’t see everything from before, like where you went, but the Sage let us see the end and that was so fucking sick. You just—” Naruto made an explosion sound. “—and then Itachi was like—” Naruto made a swishing sound. “I wish I was as cool as you, damn.”

“Oh, god, you really think so?”

“It was very cool,” Sasuke agreed.

“Last time I was in an afterlife sort of thing,” Sakura said, “I was naked. How come we aren’t naked?”

Naruto gestured behind himself with a thumb. “Old Sage guy said that only happens if you think you’re supposed to be naked when you die. You know, like from movies and stuff. Or, like, culture. And religions.”

“God damn it.”

“It’s okay, Sakura-chan. Just live your truth. Tits out is a good look.”

Sakura beamed until her face hurt. “You’re lucky you’re already dead, or I’d kill you myself.”

“There’s that murder face I know so well.”

“Hey,” Sasuke said. “While we’re here, sorry for being an asshole.”

“Well, I’m sorry for being weird and inappropriate about having a crush on you. I crossed a lot of boundaries I shouldn’t have. I was the asshole first. I would’ve bit me.”

“Hug it out, hug it out,” Naruto chanted.

They hugged it out. A moment or an eternity later, the world began to fall apart.

“That’s my cue,” Sakura said. She wiped her tears away. The ones she missed fell down into the water, rippling across the empty surface. “I love you both, be safe in the beyond, give our other dead friends some high-fives. I’m going to go home now and cry a lot.”

“Bye, Sakura!” Naruto waved, and fell back into the void without a sound.

“Hn,” Sasuke said. “That guy’s intense. Forgot how intense he was.”

“He is really a lot, isn’t he?”

Sasuke chewed on the inside of his cheek, watching her. In the world she came from, Sakura would have melted under the attention. Here, she just felt a sort of fragile fondness for all the little habits her Sasuke had, and how she knew she would forget them one by one until the last memories she had of him faded away. It made her very, very sad. But it was sweet to think about—a sort of long-term death that would hurt, but give her time to heal, as well.

“I feel like I should apologize to you more,” Sasuke said.

“Don’t. You’re dead. It’s time to let go of things. I’ve got one up on you in terms of dick moves, anyway.”

“Yeah?”

“I fucked your brother.”

Sasuke slipped into the void ass backwards, laughing so hard he cried. Sakura hadn't seen him laugh like that since they were both five, hiding behind the schoolhouse while sharing slices of fresh bread from the bakery next door.

“Goodbye, Sasuke.”

The whole universe was empty, and Sakura was full. She closed her eyes, reached for the god tree, and climbed her way back up to the light, hand over hand, root after root after root.

“The last time I met you here,” the Sage said, “You told me you were not a person worth loving. And I told you that you would change your mind. Was I right?”

Itachi held out his hands, palms-up, to catch the falling light from a billion connected worlds.

“Yes,” he said. “You were right.”

Sakura breathed in the scent of life before she opened her eyes: green, earth, sky, a recent summer rain. It was warm, getting warmer, though a brisk northerly wind tamed the temperature into something

pleasant. All around her, a grassland lush with flowers undulated in the wind. Flat on her back, with no plans of getting up anytime soon, Sakura spread her arms like wings to catch the breeze.

“Where are we?” she said.

“Home,” a voice answered.

Fingers wrapped around hers. Sakura’s heart fluttered like bees’ wings at the simple touch. Strong with the tough calluses of a swordsman, the fingers walked across her skin, taking paths she knew they’d long set to memory. It was humbling, and frightening, and wonderful how Itachi knew her so well—not just physically, but all the way down to the soul. Never in her life had she dreamed of having a love like this—not one from a storybook, but one from a myth, a legend, a song.

Sleeping flowers awakened, their blossoms opening to catch the sun quick enough for the eye to see. Itachi reached up and touched one: a black-eyed susan, its cheerful yellow and black a match to Sakura’s battle dress.

“Are these your flowers?” Itachi said.

“Not these. Either the god tree put them here for decoration, or we just got dumped in some random grassland only god knows where. Do you want me to make you a flower?”

“I already have one.”

She knew what was coming. She *knew* what was coming. But she asked him anyway, because she wanted so badly to hear him say it.

“Where?”

“Right here.”

A warm hand cupped her face, tilted her head just so, and she looked up into black eyes full of love. Love for her.

“This one’s my favorite.”

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

Itachi kissed her.

Sakura tackled him. An onlooker from the edge of the field, if they’d been looking in exactly the right direction, would have witnessed a most unusual phenomenon: clothes flying up and out from the grass, laughter that turned into moans, the smell of sweat and the taste of salt drifting over on the wind. They would’ve seen no more after that, if they were the decent sort. Some phenomenon were simply not meant to be witnessed by outsiders. And after all the business with the Great Itachi Library, Sakura thought she deserved some privacy for once.

A great tree in the distance towered over all the land, dwarfing all but the mountains. It swayed, moving with the wind. Deep within the trunk, a beehive vibrated with energy, its many thousands of denizens working in unison to preserve the sanctity of the hive: pollen, honey, eggs, defense. They left the hive one by one, soaring out into the meadow and alighting on every flower, taking special care to harvest

pollen from the flowers Sakura made; hers were unlike all the others —their pollen more plentiful, and the honey made from them more sweet.

A crow perched on the lowest branch and peered down into the meadow, tilting her head this way and that. Unlike most crows, she had some manners, and once she spotted what she was looking for, she turned around. There was no need to interrupt. There was nothing but time for reunions, today and all the days after that.

Chapter End Notes



Optional Comment Assignment

1. TELL ME EVERYTHING. Favorite lines? Scenes? Deep thoughts on Itachi's cock?

Tobirama: Harold, they're LESBIANS

next, the epilogue

Now it's the child who teaches me

Chapter Summary

In this chapter some dumb kid shows up

Chapter Notes

I'm glad some of you were catching on to what is truly important in this story, which is where the fuck did Shikamaru go. All headcanons are correct because this is the discount Yggdrasil outlet and he has so many options. Maybe he'll meet up with another version of himself and fuck him. Maybe he'll wind up in a Soulmates AU and shack up with Deidara. Maybe he did both. We just can't know for sure

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The Forest Sage walked through the forest much slower than she usually did. Normally, she did not have to go through the drudgery of climbing over and around branches, hopping across sodden ground, and lifting foliage out of the way. But today she walked with a young child in hand, and she thought it best to teach the child early that it wasn't the forest's job to get out of your way. Later, she would show the child how to delight the trees into cooperation. Today, she picked through the undergrowth, told her child the names of each plant they touched, and paused here and there to rest her hand on her belly, swollen with an overripe infant that had decided to take its damn time vacating the premises.

There was no path, per se, but the ground where the woman and her child walked was worn down into a desire line that provided a more or less direct route from the edge of the forest to the god tree, barring a few detours to pass by some particularly interesting flowers or fluorescent fungi. The air was a bit stuffy this close to the ground, but the cool shade from the canopy provided some relief from the suffocating summer heat. Even the bugs were polite; they stopped to take a drink of sweat every now and again, but the biting ones refrained from going about their unfortunate business.

The desire path ended at the god tree's primary southwesterly root, a mammoth structure that dwarfed Konoha's tallest buildings. From there, the path separated into countless more, revealing at a glance whose journey ended there and who had decided to walk all the way to the main trunk. The woman guided the child up the largest root, carried him up the tree with exposed roots as big around as elephants, and settled in the corner made by the trunk and the lowest of many gargantuan branches.

Bells of various sizes hung from the tree's smaller branches, and whenever the breeze passed over them, they sang a bittersweet tune. Each bell bore an engraved name, and the woman took the time to touch those nearest her and to hold out her child so that they could touch them as well: Obito, Jiraiya, the members of Sakura's ANBU detail who'd been killed in action, and others. The metal was worn and shiny on the lip from where hands had touched them again and again.

Bees and other pollinators filled the air with a hum of activity; the tree was blooming that day, and the perfume made by the delicate blossoms carried across the plateau into the lungs of everyone lucky enough to be standing downwind. The child was not afraid of the bees and held his hand out for them to walk across his palm, giggling at the tickle of their tiny legs and exploratory nibbles.

"I want to read the book again," the child told his mother. "My favorite parts."

"The mangroves?"

"I like them."

“We can start with those, then,” the woman said. “But we can't stay in the woods all day today like we did yesterday. Uncle Sasuke will be back from the capitol city in a few hours, and you know he always has treats.”

“Is he telling people what to do again?”

“He’s teaching a lecture at the university hospital, yes.”

“Can I have some taffy?”

“We’ll have to see what he brings, baby. I’m not sure what he’ll have this time.”

“I want to look at the mangroves.”

The woman reached in her satchel, but it was not a book that she pulled out, but a fruit. It was about the size of her hand, round, and orange.

“I have something to show you first,” the woman said. “Do you know what this is?”

“It’s a fruit, and it stinks.”

“It is pretty stinky,” the woman agreed, and held the fruit out for the child to touch. “This is a fruit from the god tree. I went to the very top of the primary trunk to get it for you yesterday.”

“That’s so high up,” the child said. They ran their fingers across the fruit, finding the dimples where the skin gathered and giving them a poke.

“It wasn’t too bad of a trip. I asked the god tree to help me.”

“Is the fruit special?”

The woman considered the fruit. She imagined a time, thousands of years ago, when a different woman stepped into the light of this world. Had that other woman wondered what the fruit of the gods tasted like—whether it would be sticky or dry, sour or sweet, tough or soft or crunchy? And after that woman waded through the blood of her slain cousin and plucked the fruit of the gods for herself, what had she seen? Did she, too, turn it over in her hands, taking measure of all the world’s chakra contained in so small a space? Did she guess its weight? Did she wonder if the seed inside was edible, and if so, had she made plans for its use even as she devoured the flesh around it?

How difficult it must have been for Kaguya to deny herself that power. Few people truly knew what it felt like to hold the power of nature in their hands, to feel the heartbeat of life itself, to encase reality within the warmth of human hands, cradling it like an injured bird. Condemning Kaguya was easy. Understanding her was not.

“A long time ago,” the woman said. “There was a princess who infected the god tree with her will. She used the god tree to steal chakra from everyone in the world, and forced it to put all that chakra into one fruit for her to eat, so that she could keep it all.”

“Did she hate everyone? Was she a bad person?”

“She was afraid. When you control things, you become afraid that people will take them away from you, and you start to believe that only you know the best way to keep those things safe. The princess thought she was keeping humans safe by taking away their chakra. But when she did that, the god tree became sick, because it wasn’t allowed to be a normal tree. The princess wanted the tree to follow her rules, but that isn’t the way nature works. We’re just one small part of the world. It’s our job to help nature stay healthy. We can ask it for things, yes—and humans have a lot of good ideas about how some parts of nature could be different—but it’s not right to tell it what to do all the time like we know better.”

“That’s why we talk to the trees and help them. Because of the bad lady and what she did.”

The woman nodded. “That’s why we talk to the trees.”

“When can *I* ask the trees to do stuff with me? I want them to be my house.”

“A custom tree house is a little advanced; if a tree is big enough to put a house in, it might not want to listen to you right away. I think we should start from scratch and let the tree get to know you better.”

“What do I have to do?”

The woman placed the fruit in the child’s hands. “Eat it up, and I’ll show you.”

The child ate the fruit of the gods, wincing at the pungent taste. No two people who’d tried the fruit could agree on a standard set of words to describe it. For some people, the fruit of the gods tasted like mushy peaches. For others, underripe bananas. It was different for

everyone. The Forest Sage thought the fruit of the gods tasted like sour blueberries.

“It’s nasty,” the child said, holding up the seed. “Like old pizza. Is it going to do anything to me?”

“It’ll make you feel like you can do anything in the whole world. But not forever. In a couple minutes, the feeling will go away. That’s normal. It’s not like the fruit that the princess ate. This fruit is something anyone can eat. Your dad tried one once. And Sasuke. And lots of other people we know.”

“Okay. How do I get my tree house?”

“Not so fast. First we’re going to plant that seed, you and me, and then we’re going to come take care of it every day until it’s strong enough to stand on its own and help the world it lives on. Just like this one. A little baby god tree that will find its way home one day.”

“Where are we going to plant it?”

Sakura smiled. “That’s the best part,” she said. She lifted up one hand, and behind her, a crack opened up in the sky, revealing a vast darkness dappled with shimmering light. “It’s your turn to decide.”

Chapter End Notes

I didn’t give this little man an official name on purpose. But I figure that the likelihood of him being named Jiraiya is extremely high.

“Rock Lee Itachi Uchiha, you were named for two bad-ass bitches. One of them had a sword with an optional black flame mode and he was probably the bravest man I ever knew.”

“Dad, that’s you.”

“I said what I said.”

Anyway fuck giving up on the environment and yourself and the world and wallowing in despair, we can fix this shit and YOU can be okay.

Here we are at the end. If you read this story, gave it a kudos, gave it a bookmark, or what have you, I would love more than anything else for you to drop a line here. Even if your brain empty and all you can come up with is a few words or a series of emojis, that is valid and I appreciate you reaching out. Building a community of friends and connections is what fandom is all about.

My fandom tumblr (pretty sparse, I just use it mainly for updates and such) is [guiltyfandomtrashwonderland](#). If you have an interesting prompt, drop it with an ask. Perhaps it will manifest more Naruto Content.

My Top Gun shitposting blog is [topgunreacts](#).

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!